Peasants in India's Non-Violent Revolution

Practice and Theory

MRIDULA MUKHERJEE

SAGE SERIES IN MODERN INDIAN HISTORY

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Sage Series in Modern Indian History-V

Series Editors

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Sage Publications
New Delhi • Thousand Oaks • London

First published in 2004 by

Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd
B-42, Panchsheel Enclave
New Delhi 110 017

Sage Publications Inc
2455 Teller Road
Thousand Oaks, California 91320

Sage Publications Ltd
1 Oliver's Yard
55 City Road, London EC1Y 1SP

Published by Tejeshwar Singh for Sage Publications India Pvt Ltd, typeset in 10/12 Palatino by Prism Graphix, New Delhi and printed at Chaman Enterprises, New Delhi.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Mukherjee, Mridula.
Peasants in India's non-violent revolution: practice and theory/Mridula Mukherjee.
p. cm.—(Sage series in modern Indian history; 5)
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Peasantry—India—Political activity—History—20th century. 2. India—Politics and Government—20th century. I. Title. II. Series.

HD1537.I4M816 954.03'58—dc22 2004 2004008550

ISBN: 0-7619-9686-9 (Hb) 81-7829-150-0 (India–Hb)

Sage Production Team: Abantika Banerjee, Proteeti Banerjee, Mathew P.J., and Santosh Rawat

In memory of my mother
Savitri Shori Mahajan
and
for my daughter
Madhavi

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Series Editors' Preface

The Sage Series in Modern Indian History is intended to bring together the growing volume of historical studies that share a very broad common historiographic focus.

In the 50 years since independence from colonial rule, research and writing on modern Indian history has given rise to intense debates resulting in the emergence of different schools of thought. Prominent among them are the Cambridge School and the Subaltern School. Some of us at the Jawaharlal Nehru University, along with many colleagues in other parts of the country, have tried to promote teaching and research along somewhat different lines. We have endeavoured to steer clear of colonial stereotypes, nationalist romanticization, sectarian radicalism and a rigid and dogmatic approach. We have also discouraged the "flavour of the month" approach, which tries to ape whatever is currently fashionable.

Of course, a good historian is fully aware of contemporary trends in historical writing and of historical work being done elsewhere, and draws heavily on the comparative approach, i.e., the historical study of other societies, states and nations, and on other disciplines, especially economics, political science, sociology and social anthropology. A historian tries to understand the past and make it relevant to the present and the future. History thus also caters to the changing needs of society and social development. A historian is a creature of his or her times, yet a good historian tries to use every tool available to the historian's craft to avoid a conscious bias to get as near the truth as possible.

The approach we have tried to evolve looks sympathetically, though critically, at the Indian national liberation struggle and other popular movements such as those of labour, peasants, lower castes, tribal peoples and women. It also looks at colonialism as a structure and a system, and analyzes changes in economy, society and culture in the colonial context as also in the context of independent India. It focuses on communalism and casteism as major features of modern Indian development. The volumes in the series will tend to reflect this approach as also its changing and developing features. At the broadest plane our approach is committed to the Enlightenment values of rationalism, humanism, democracy and secularism.

The series will consist of well-researched volumes with a wider scope which deal with a significant historiographical aspect even while devoting meticulous attention to detail. They will have a firm empirical grounding based on an exhaustive and rigorous examination of primary sources (including those available in archives in different parts of India and often abroad); collections of private and institutional papers; newspapers and journals (including those in Indian languages); oral testimony; pamphlet literature; and contemporary literary works. The books in this series, while sharing a broad historiographic approach, will invariably have considerable differences in analytical frameworks.

The many problems that hinder academic pursuit in developing societies—e.g., relatively poor library facilities, forcing scholars to run from library to library and city to city and yet not being able to find many of the necessary books; inadequate institutional support within universities; a paucity of research-funding organizations; a relatively underdeveloped publishing industry, and so on—have plagued historical research and writing as well. All this had made it difficult to initiate and sustain efforts at publishing a series along the lines of the Cambridge History series or the history series of some of the best US and European universities.

But the need is there because, in the absence of such an effort, a vast amount of work on Indian history being done in Delhi and other university centres in India as also in British, US, Russian, Japanese, Australian and European universities which shares a common historiographic approach remains scattered and has no "voice". Also, many fine works published by small Indian publishers never reach the libraries and bookshops in India or abroad.

We are acutely aware that one swallow does not make a summer. This series will only mark the beginning of a new attempt at presenting the efforts of scholars to evolve autonomous (but not indigenist) intellectual approaches in modern Indian history.

Bipan Chandra
Mridula Mukherjee
Aditya Mukherjee

List of Abbreviations

AICC	All-India Congress Committee
AIKS	All-India Kisan Sabha
AISPC	All-India States' People's Conference
CPI	Communist Party of India
CSP	Congress Socialist Party
DCC	District Congress Committee
DIR	Defence of India Rules
FR	Fortnightly Reports
H.P.	Home Department Political Branch
INA	Indian National Army
IOL	India Office Library
IOR	India Office Records
JNU	Jawaharlal Nehru University
NJBS	Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha
PCC	Provincial Congress Committee
PEPSU	Patiala and East Punjab States Union
PKC	Punjab Kisan Committee
PLCD	Punjab Legislative Council Debates
SGPC	Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee
UP	United Provinces

Acknowledgements

In the course of this work I have accumulated, not unlike the Indian peasants, a huge burden of debt which public acknowledgement can do little to lighten.

The largest component of this debt is due to Professor Bipan Chandra, whose intellectual stamp on this work is so clear that it can scarcely escape detection. It would be no exaggeration to say that it is his unflinching faith and unquestioning support that has provided the sustenance necessary to see it through to its present shape. I am a beneficiary of his particular style of academic training, which combines rigorous criticism with total intellectual freedom. It is from him that one has tried to imbibe the courage to fearlessly take positions that might run counter to both established orthodoxy and fashionable heterodoxy, as well as try and link academic pursuits with social concerns. I welcome this opportunity to warmly acknowledge his continuing generosity, friendship and affection.

Another large component of my debt is owed to Aditya, my husband and companion. He has been with me constantly through all the highs and lows, the excitement and the depression that a long project of this nature inevitably entails. His involvement in all stages of this work has been total. From searching for files in dingy district archives, to travelling to remote villages to track down my living sources, to editing, proof-reading, and endless discussion, he has always been there with me. In more ways that can be stated, this work is as much his as mine.

It will continue to be a matter of great regret that my father, Dr Vidya Dhar Mahajan, was not able to see this work in its present shape. My initial interest in the field of history was undoubtedly aroused by his own, and it was from his example that I first imbibed the habit of engagement with wider social concerns. My mother, Smt. Savitri Mahajan, extended me such total support, both emotional and material, that I can unhesitatingly say that without her help the course of my life would have been very different. Her intellectual help has been no less—she helped with the transcription and translation of the interviews, and diligently searched for errors in hundreds of pages of typescript. Her unexpected and sudden departure from

our lives has taken away much of the anticipated pleasure of seeing this work in print. I still find it hard to believe that she will not be there to compare the final proofs with me or smile at the sight of the dedication.

My sister, Sucheta Mahajan, has also accompanied this work through its many stages. She was a companion in persuading hesitant official functionaries in little-frequented record-rooms in Punjab to allow a peep into their holdings. She has, over the years, been a willing listener, critic, editor and proof-reader, as well as a friend and co-worker. My brother, Ajay, in his own very special way, has been a participant in my life and my concerns. I have also benefited immensely from many stimulating intellectual and political discussions with my brother-in-law, Bodh Prakash, as well as relied on him for support in many moments of need. Sucheta, Bodh and Ajay have played a crucial role as babysitters as well, once Madhavi arrived on the scene to ensure that deadlines were even harder to meet! My nephews Varun and Shrikant and my daughter Madhavi made sure that work was interrupted often enough for adults to retain their sanity.

Among those who have sustained me over the years with their loyalty and friendship, I would particularly like to mention my friends, Manuela Albuquerque and Neera Manchanda, and my sister-in-law, Aditi Mukherjee. My parents-in-law, Shri Shashanka Shekhar Mukherjee and the late Smt. Durga Mukherjee have always taken a special interest and pride in my work. Shashwati, Mahesh and Abha Srivastava have generously provided the much-needed diversions and emotional support over the years, as have Jayanti and the late Aditi Kumar Dutt, Surjo and Sambudhha, and Kasturi and Purshottam Bharadwaj.

I must also thank the very large number of political activists who gave so freely of their time and wisdom. I cannot possibly mention all of them by name but I do wish to particularly thank Sushila Chain and Chain Singh Chain, G.S. Randhawa, Bhagat Singh Bilga, Ujagar Singh Bilga and his family, Jagir Singh Joga, Jwala Singh Barapind, Mota Singh, Darbara Singh, Master Hari Singh, Jagjit Singh Anand and Chhajju Mal Vaid for going out of their way to facilitate my work. The late Shri B.D. Talib was of the utmost help in providing introductions to his numerous friends and comrades in Punjab and by sharing his first-hand knowledge of Punjab villages and Punjab politics.

I am very grateful to my colleagues at the Centre for Historical Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, for the support and sustenance they have provided over the years. I would also like to thank the many friends, teachers, colleagues and students who have helped in innumerable ways. I would particularly like to mention S. Gopal, Romila Thapar, K.N. Panikkar, S. Bhattacharya, A.R. Desai, Irfan Habib, Barun De, Parthasarathi Gupta, P.C. Joshi, Ravinder Kumar, Randhir Singh, V.N. Datta, J.S. Grewal, Amit

Bhaduri, G.S. Bhalla, C.P. Bhambhri, Shirin Moosvi, Nobuko Nagasaki, Haruka Yanagisawa, Tsukasa Mizushima, Catherine Harned, Sandeep Chawla, Indu Banga, K.L. Tuteja, D.N. Gupta, Suchitra Gupta, Bhagwan Josh, Sashi Joshi, Usha Chandra, Shantha Sinha, Abha and Anil Pandya, Swadesh Mahajan, K. Gopalankutty, Sanjay Prasad, Sangeeta Singh, Visalakshi Menon, Anthony Thomas, Salil Mishra, Gyanesh Kudaisya, Medha Kudaisya, Suman Kumar Singh, Gautam Pandey, Chandi Prasad Nanda, Shri Krishan, Suryakant Nath, Rakesh Batabyal, R. Mahalakshmi, Vinita Damodaran, Shyam Narayan Singh, Lata Singh, Shubhra De, Manas Guha, Richa Malhotra, Bikash Chandra, Amit Mishra and Vikram Menon.

I wish to particularly thank Professor John Cell, Professor Richard Fox, Professor Charles Bergquist and Professor Carol Smith of the Duke University, USA, and Professor Edward Haynes of Winthrop College, USA, for the intellectual stimulation and the sustenance they provided during my stay at the Duke University in 1986.

I was fortunate to have many opportunities to share some of the ideas presented in this work with scholars and activists in a variety of institutions. I would particularly like to thank the Culture Studies Discussion Group, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, Institute of Oriental Culture, University of Tokyo, the South Asian Studies Association, Tokyo, the South Asian Studies Association, Osaka, the Department of History, Tokyo University, The Academic Staff College, JNU, the Academic Staff College, Aligarh, Hindu College, Delhi University, the Departments of History of Punjab University, Chandigarh, Kurukshetra University, Mumbai University, the Central University, Hyderabad, the Centre for Development Studies, Trivandrum, the Centre for Rural and Industrial Development, Chandigarh, and the Andhra History Congress, the Orissa History Congress, the M. Venkatarangayya Foundation, Hyderabad, the Young India Project, Penukonda, and the Delhi Historians' Group.

Martin Moir and Rosemary Seton of the India Office Library and Records provided generous professional and personal support on the occasions that I had the opportunity of working in London. I also recall with warmth the companionship of my friend, Dr Charles Hall, my comrade-in-arms at the Patiala Archives, whose hospitality I abused shamelessly on my many visits to Patiala.

I must also thank the staff of the Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi, the Punjab State Archives, Patiala, the Punjab Government Secretariat Library, Chandigarh, the India Office Library and Records, London, Centre for South Asian Studies, Cambridge, the British Museum Library, London, the Ratan Tata Library, Delhi School of Economics, Delhi University, New Delhi, the Institute of Economic Growth Library, Delhi, the Archives of Contemporary History, Jawaharlal Nehru University,

New Delhi, for all the help they gave me. I am grateful to Shri Shudh Swaroop and Shri Om Prakash, and Shrimati Savitri Bisht, and Shri Ajay Sharma for the diligence with which they typed various versions of this study.

I also welcome the opportunity to express my gratitude to Shri Tejeshwar Singh, for the personal interest he has taken in the Sage Modern History Series in general, and in this work in particular. Omita Goyal has always been most accommodating in re-setting deadlines, and Debjani M. Dutta's very valuable suggestions have made major improvements in the organization of the book. Abantika and Proteeti have patiently seen the book through the many stages of editing and production.

Mridula Mukherjee

Introduction

Throughout history, peasants have, to put it mildly, been an enigma to those who have tried to deal with them, whether they be monarchs who have tried to govern them or revolutionaries who have tried to lead them, tax collectors whose job it has been to fleece them or welfare workers who want to get them a better deal, social anthropologists who live with them to know them better or historians who unravel their past to comprehend their present and "imagine" their future.

Their history is simultaneously a story of rebellion and of silent suffering, of collective action and of individualism, of the proverbial peasant guile and of the equally proverbial peasant gullibility, of a fierce attachment to home and hearth and of trans-continental migration, of adaptability and of stubborn resistance to change, of an urge towards an egalitarian order and of strict observance of hierarchy, of mass conversion to new religions and of unbelievable sacrifices to protect the faith of their forefathers, of the best of traditional cultural values and of barbarism, of faithful continuation of centuries-old farming practices and of ready acceptance of new technologies, of abiding by the law and of being notoriously recalcitrant.

These and many other apparent paradoxes in the history of the peasantries of the world are at least partly explained by the very length of the history. The peasantry is, arguably, the oldest "class" in the world. It not only predated but provided the basis for the emergence of the kings, the nobles and the feudal lords, the merchants and the traders. All other social classes are at least a few centuries younger than the peasantry, and the industrial working class almost an infant in comparison.

The sheer longevity of the peasantry's existence makes one sometimes wonder about the possibility of its immortality. While many of those who lived off its labour and rode piggy-back on it through history have been consigned to the pages of history, the peasantry has demonstrated an uncanny ability for survival. It has defied the logic of economies of scale that capitalism held up to pronounce its sad but inevitable extinction. It has, with equal doggedness, forced socialism to raise it to life from the ashes of its collective farms, kolkhozes and communes. Those who thought they had sung its last requiem are now singing a new tune whose refrain is "the

economic viability of the peasant farm" and many of us who denied it any rationality now talk about a "peasant rationality".

Peasants have also shown scant respect for all the sophisticated theories and neat models that have been constructed to explain and predict their behaviour. They have cocked a sly snook at both those who thought their essence was homogeneity and those who differentiated them into petty bourgeois and proletariat and forgot that they were still peasants. "Middle peasants" who were supposed to cultivate with family labour and have nothing to do with the market were found to be deeply linked to it and, as in India, even hiring labour. "Rich", "middle" and "poor" peasants are found so often to be playing roles different from those defined for them by Mao Ze Dong or Eric Wolf that one has begun to wonder whether those categories were at all useful. For example, "poor" peasants who were expected because of their class position to be the most militant, if not revolutionary, have often turned out to be the most docile. And "rich" peasants who were relegated to the "reactionary" end of the political spectrum by being called "kulaks" have just as often been found in the leadership of protest movements. Nor have debates about whether their classification into rich, middle and poor should be made on the basis of size of landholding and access to other resources, or on the basis of family income, or on the basis of the position occupied in the structure of agrarian production relations, taken us very far in answering questions about the political and social and even economic behaviour of the peasantry.

The reasons for the failure of the peasants to live up to the grandiose theories or perfect models built for them lies not so much in their "inherent" unpredictability, but possibly in the very flawed nature of the project of model-building. It is arguably unreasonable to expect that a rich and varied history spread over not only many centuries but millenia, over many continents, distilled through many distinct cultures and civilizations and spanning many epochs, can be encompassed or encapsulated within any one model or theory, no matter how sophisticated or complex it might be.

Is it reasonable, for example, to expect that a model evolved to explain the experience of Muslim residents of a village in Malaysia in the relatively stable 1970s, in the age of television and mass media, of political parties and elections, as has been done recently by James Scott in his *Weapons of the Weak*, can provide an adequate framework for comprehending peasant activity in other situations even in the twentieth century, for example, in the Mexican Revolution, in the Chinese Revolution, in the Russian Revolution and in our very own national movement? One can understand the necessity for an emphasis on "everyday resistance" as a counter-foil to the obsession with and glorification of the more dramatic and violent moments of peasant protest. It is also possible to sympathize with the view that peasants have often gained little and sometimes lost heavily from participation in

the grand events of history. But can this become the basis for, to use the terminology currently in vogue, "privileging" "everyday resistance" over all other forms of protest and resistance, for all peasants, in all epochs? Further, even if its is accepted that the peasants of Malaysia in the 1970s were no longer under the ideological hegemony of the landlords and the ruling classes, must this lead to an acceptance of a general theory about the ideological and cultural autonomy of the peasantry?

My reservations about a certain kind of methodology adopted in peasant studies are not, I hope, merely a reflection of the historian's well-founded scepticism about model-building in general. Models built on the basis of an analysis of certain kinds of group behaviour may well be useful tools to comprehend the activities of broadly similar groups in broadly similar conditions. It is my contention, however, that it is as possible to question the validity of a model devised to explain the behaviour of, say, multinational industrial entrepreneurs in the late twentieth century, being used to study the early British industrialists of the eighteenth century, as it is to raise doubts about applying to fourteenth-century German or English peasants, or even early or mid-twentieth-century Chinese or Indian peasants, models built around data gathered from Malay peasants of the late twentieth century. A model built around Malay peasants of the 1970s may well be used, however, to understand contemporary Pakistani peasants, because some of the conditions, such as Islam and limited democracy, are similar. If the Malay model was to be used for India, it would have to be modified to accommodate at least the difference in the cultural codes as well as the imperatives of a vibrant democracy, to name only a few ready examples.

In the long, and mostly unknown, history of the peasantry, and even in the known history of the Indian peasantry, the story that has been narrated here is but a miniscule part, a mere drop in the vast ocean. For that reason, and for the many others already stated, I do not propose to construct any general model of peasant behaviour.

II

This study has been a long time in the making. The extended period of gestation has meant that fashions have changed in the meantime. When this study was conceived, Vietnam had ensured that peasants were still being pursued with vehemence by many whose earlier choices as actors and heroes—workers and students—had refused to fit the revolutionary bill. By the time this study was completed, the directors of revolutionary drama had moved on to new vistas—women, ethnic and racial minorities (or may be just women of oppressed minorities), "indigenous" people whose environment and lifestyles have been encroached upon, or, in our own

version, a combination of those discriminated against on the basis of caste, religion or ethnicity, and may be even gender. It has been completed in the faith that the relevance of academic pursuits is not determined by the "flavour of the month", and also because peasants are still very much around, along with their problems, at least in our part of the world and still continue to excite considerable debate as subjects and objects of strategies of economic, social and political transformation in the past as well as in the present. Besides, who knows what fate awaits those who have failed to learn the lessons taught by Vietnamese peasants and have thus run the risk of being taught a lesson or two by the peasants of the world's most ancient civilization. The oldest class in the world may yet have a few surprises in store for the world's youngest imperialism. Peasants may well be back in fashion in the Spring Collection of 2004!

This book attempts to make an intervention in the theoretical debates regarding the role of peasants in revolutionary transformations in the modern world. It does so from the vantage-point of the Indian anti-colonial national revolution—a revolution based on a strategy of non-violent action in which the central role was assigned to peasants. The non-violent, yet revolutionary, political practice of peasants in the Indian revolution has been largely ignored in these debates because of the automatic (though unjustified) association of revolution with the large-scale use of violence. While this notion of violence as the essential handmaiden of revolution may have been excusable in the days before unarmed millions with candles and roses as weapons swept away non-democratic regimes in Eastern Europe and the Soviet Union, in South Korea, in the Phillipines and elsewhere, the time has now come to give non-violent revolution its due, and in this to turn our attention to the principal players, namely peasants. Even James Scott, who otherwise has helped in a major way in turning the spotlight away from the exclusive concentration on violent revolution to the non-violent everyday peasant resistance, does not consider the Indian case as worthy of attention, possibly because, being so overtly *political*, it does not fit into his model, which is of *apolitical* everyday resistance.

This book subjects to critical scrutiny a wide range of theoretical models used for analysing peasant consciousness and behaviour. It is particularly critical of the framework offered by Subaltern Studies, which it subjects to a thorough and elaborate critique. It argues that the concrete political practice of Indian peasants, which it documents in detail, does not match subaltern theory, especially the notions of autonomous consciousness, subaltern/élite antagonism, privileging of violent resistance as essentially subaltern, etc. While appreciating many of its profound insights, it also questions certain elements of the Marxist understanding of the peasantry, especially with reference to the relationship between class and nation.

In a similar fashion, the work of scholars such as Eric Hobsbawm, Eric Wolf, Jean Chesneaux, Lucien Bianco, James Scott, Theda Skocpol, Theodor Shanin and Barrington Moore, who have made important contributions to peasant historiography, is critically analysed with the objective of sifting out what is useful for the understanding of the Indian case and of questioning those generalizations which are thrown into doubt by the actual practice of Indian peasants. It argues that the actual political practice of the Indian peasants, representing one-sixth of humanity, refuses to fit into the theoretical straightjackets provided for it and demands new theoretical and methodological space, some of which this study has sought to create. It rejects the widely prevalent notion that peasants' consciousness remains traditional even when they indulge in "revolutionary" action and argues that they can and do indeed acquire, in the Indian case, a modern anti-colonial, democratic and even "class" consciousness.

The discussion on historiography is organized thematically in Book II. Chapter 8 presents a detailed critique of the Subaltern and Marxist writings on the subject of peasants and anti-colonial nationalism and argues for an alternative perspective. Chapter 9 examines the debate around the issues of violence and non-violence and presents a detailed account of the forms of struggle and methods of mobilization adopted by peasants. Chapter 10 focuses on the relationship between peasants and outsiders and also the social origins of leaders and participants. Chapter 11 suggests the elements of an alternative framework for analyzing peasant consciousness by means of a close look at the issues which aroused different strata of the peasantry to struggle. It also examines the sources of legitimacy in peasant consciousness. The last chapter questions the dominant notions about the impossibility of the transformation of the consciousness of peasants and argues that the actual political practice of the Indian peasantry suggests that this transformation is a reality and therefore needs to become a theoretical possibility.

The political world of the peasants of Punjab (a major north Indian province), which this book constructs in intricate minutiae, forms the substantial part of the empirical base on which the theoretical and methodological discussion conducted in this study rests. In fact, surprisingly for a region that has occupied centre-stage in the story of Indian agricultural development as well as in the political sphere due to Khalistani militancy, this is the first time that the story of the political movements of the peasants of Punjab in the colonial era is being told.

The narrative has been woven together on the basis of many hitherto unused sources in India and the United Kingdom, which include local, provincial and national-level official records, newspapers, pamphlets, posters, private papers and institutional papers. Apart from these more conventional archival sources that are the staple of the historian's craft, I

have made extensive use of the oral testimony of political activists and participants. This hitherto largely untapped source proved extremely useful not only for supplementing factual information about movements not adequately documented in written sources, but especially for aspects such as ideology, consciousness, social origins of participants, methods of grass-roots mobilization, etc., on which inevitably written sources are far from adequate. Some of the interviews, which are listed in the bibliography, were conducted by me on an individual basis, whereas others were conducted as part of the project headed by Professor Bipan Chandra on "The History of the Indian National Movement", in which I have been engaged along with some of my colleagues for the last few years.

The story of political practice in rural Punjab, presented in Book I, takes in its sweep both the heroic struggles as well as the no less important everyday politics of peasants. It tries to capture their profile when they were marching with the nation in big national struggles as well as when they were engaged in local struggles on purely class or peasant issues. It treats with equal attention all those who came to the peasant's door—Akalis, Unionists, nationalists of all hues, whether Gandhians, Congress Socialists, Kirti Communists, CPI Communists or radical intellectuals like Professor Brij Narain. It begins with a chapter on the historical background which brings the story of peasant protest in the colonial period to 1925. Chapter 2 traces the efforts towards the establishment of peasant organizations by various political groups and parties and the process of the fashioning of an agenda of peasant demands and action. In Chapter 3, the story moves on to the Civil Disobedience Movement and the activity of peasants as they march along with the rest of the nation, building new links, learning new methods, absorbing new ideas and gaining a new confidence. Chapter 4 documents the building of the national-level peasant organization and its impact on the movement in the province. It also highlights the process of ideological radicalization, in which the Congress President, Jawaharlal Nehru, played a crucial role, especially during his election tours. Chapter 5 tells the stories of many different struggles—the Amritsar Kisan Morcha, the tenants' struggle in the canal colonies, as well as the Lahore Kisan Morcha—as well as of the everyday politics of the Jullundur peasants, who did not have a "*morcha*" of their own but were arguably the most politically conscious of all. It also looks at the politics of the agrarian legislation initiated by the Unionist ministry during this phase (1938–39) which marked the high-water mark of peasant upsurge in the Punjab, as it did in many other provinces. The years 1939 to 1947 are the subject of Chapter 6, and the political land-scape shifts rapidly during these years. The Individual Civil Disobedience Movement, the Quit India Movement, the Communist Party's People's War line, the post-war political ferment and the tragic partition that divided the nation and the province, all impacted on the peasants. In Chapter 7, I take

up the story of the princely state of Patiala, in which the peasants fought one of their most long-lasting and powerful struggles, covering the years 1930 to 1953. The inclusion of Patiala enables a comparative look at peasant movements operating within the very divergent political and state structures of autocratic Patiala and semi-democratic British Punjab, which in turn helps in a delineation of the variables that influence the choice of modes and forms of protest. Some of the more general aspects of the political experience of the Punjab peasants, such as the relationship between peasants, peasant movements and the national movement, forms of protest and methods of mobilization, social origins of leaders and participants, peasant consciousness, etc., are presented in Book II, so that they can be analysed alongside the experience of peasants from other parts of India and also form part of the broader historiographical debate.

(A forthcoming companion volume, titled *Colonializing Agriculture: The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism*, looks at the agrarian economy of Punjab under colonialism. I chose to work on the economic facets of the life of the Punjab peasants because I found that some of the more important questions about peasant politics, which was the initial focus of interest, could not be answered without a more thorough grasp of the nature of the agrarian economy. Neither the earlier notions about Punjab as "the land of the peasant proprietors", where indebtedness was a result of prosperity and not poverty, nor the newer theories that heralded the rise of the rich peasant, seemed to quite match the peasants' political behaviour. A closer examination of the impact of colonialism on the agrarian economy as a whole, and on the agrarian class structure in particular, thus became imperative. I attempt to delineate the nature of the forces that were buffeting the peasants once they became part of the modern world of colonialism. I examine the nature of the burdens of the peasantry, and the impact of the markets in produce, credit, land and labour. I also analyse the degree to which the peasantry had been differentiated and whether or not this process had led to the emergence of classes or groups capable of and willing to invest in agricultural production. I then compare Punjab with other regions of colonial India, and especially with its supposed "polar opposite", eastern India, to test the validity of the notion that Punjab deviated sharply from the typical colonial pattern.)

Book I

Political Practice in Rural Punjab: The “Heroic” and the “Everyday”

ONE

Peasant Protest: The Historical Context

We take up the story of peasant struggles in Punjab in the middle of the third decade of the twentieth century when the first signs of the emergence of *modern* peasant organizations become visible. These stirrings were a product as much of the new consciousness on the part of different political trends of the significance of and need for the political organization of the peasants, as they were of the new urges and awakening of the peasants themselves to modern politics and ideologies and modern forms of political organization—the two processes were, in fact, dialectically woven together.

To reach this point, at which a new type and genre of politics was to become a part of their historical agenda, the peasants of Punjab, or at least significant sections of them, had traversed a long and tortuous road. The many twists and turns, triumph and disappointments, joys and travails that marked this journey are an indelible part of their story; in these pages, however, we are constrained to recount the early part of the story only in its barest outline.

The Kooka Movement[1]

It is customary to regard the Kooka or Namdhari Movement as the first major movement that mobilized the Sikh peasants of Punjab after the onset of colonial ru1e. Founded sometime in the late 1850s or early 1860s by Baba Ram Singh, himself a disciple of a saint, Baba Balak Singh, this was

[1] I have based my account of the Kooka Movement on the following: Fauja Singh, *Kuka Movement*, Delhi, 1965; M.M. Ahluwalia, *Freedom Struggle in India*, Delhi, 1965, pp. 245–54; Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, New Delhi, pp. 1–15; R.C. Majumdar, ed., *The History and Culture of the Indian People*, Vol. IX, Bombay, 1963, pp. 901–904; Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, Delhi, 1978, pp. 6–7.

a movement basically of religious and social reform, with emphasis on protection of the cow, giving up of worship of idols and graves and against female infanticide, early marriage, bride-price, and lavish celebration of marriages. It is also said to have had political overtones such as a desire to restore Sikh sovereignty and injunctions to non-cooperate with the British educational institutions, law courts, postal services and to use *swadeshi* instead of British goods. The evidence on this aspect is, however, far from convincing and the political significance of the movement stems mainly from the fact that the British used the most inhuman and brutal repression against its protagonists.

The authorities had been watching the growth of the Kooka Movement with increasing suspicion and had on an occasion even interned Baba Ram Singh in his village. In 1871, the murder of some butchers involved in the slaughter of cows by some fanatical bands of Kookas in Amritsar and Raikot was punished with executions and public hangings, and in 1872, when another fanatical band of 150 Kookas, against Baba Ram Singh's advice, attacked the palace and treasury of the small Indian state of Malerkotla (near Ludhiana), the deputy commissioner of Ludhiana lost all sense of proportion and had 49 Kookas blown from the cannon's mouth, without even a summary trial. Baba Ram Singh was deported to Burma (where he died in confinement 13 years later) despite the fact that he had informed the authorities immediately about the plans of the fanatical band that attacked Malerkotla. The blatant ignoring of the rule of law, the lack of any sense of proportion in the punishment meted out (only 10 had died in the attack on Malerkotla), the barbaric nature of the punishment itself, the vindictiveness shown towards Baba Ram Singh, who was held in high esteem by the vast mass of the ordinary Sikhs and whose guilt was never established, all this created an image of British rule in the popular mind that was vastly different from the one sought to be projected by the British themselves—the image of a benevolent, paternalist government based on the rule of law.

The Agrarian Agitation of 1907[2]

A qualitatively different position in the history of peasant resistance in Punjab is, however, that of the famous "Punjab Disturbance" of 1907, which

[2] I have based my account of the agrarian agitation of 1907 on the following: Sucheta Mahajan, "Anti-British Agitation in 1907 Punjab", *Punjab History Conference Proceedings*, Fifteenth Session, 1981, pp. 209–309: N. Gerald Barrier, "The Punjab Disturbance of 1907; The Response of the British Government in India to Agrarian Unrest", *The Punjab Past and Present*, Vol. VIII, Part II, October 1976, pp. 444–76; Satya M. Rai, *Punjabi Heroic Tradition, 1900–1947*, Patiala, 1978, pp. 9–26; Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, pp. 16–30; Pardaman Singh and Joginder Singh Dhanki, *Buried Alive: Autobiography, Speeches and Writings of An Indian Revolutionary, Sardar Ajit Singh*, New Delhi, 1984.

can truly be described as the first significant struggle of the peasants of Punjab against the colonial state. Peasant discontent arose out of a series of government measures, the most important of which was the Punjab Land Colonization Bill introduced in the Punjab Council on 25 October 1906 which sought to drastically change the conditions on which land was granted to colonists in the canal colonies of the Punjab. In addition, the government also ordered in November 1906 a sharp enhancement in the canal water rates on the Bari Doab Canal which irrigated the districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Lahore; the average increase itself was 25 per cent, but on special crops as high as 50 per cent. Simultaneously, there was a sharp increase in the land revenue of Rawalpindi District as the result of a new settlement.

The measure that aroused the strongest reaction was the Colonization Bill, coming as it did as the culmination of a series of recent attempts by the government to tighten their hold on the colonists by means of levying fines or confiscating land for infringements of the conditions laid down for grant of land. These conditions, which included the obligatory planting of trees, maintenance of sanitary conditions, building of houses in designated areas, residence requirements and the like were resented by the colonists and when the system of fines was sought to be applied with great strictness, many of the better-off colonists, such as the "yeoman grantees", had taken the matter to the civil courts and even secured favourable judgements. The Colonization Bill of 1906 sought to legalize the imposition of fines, declare the colonies outside the purview of the courts and make the conditions governing the grant of land more stringent, especially by introducing a new rule which flouted the customary laws of inheritance by insisting upon primogeniture and even the lapse of land to the government in case there were no male heirs. It further sought to debar the colonists from purchasing property rights in the land, thus altering an earlier provision whereby they could purchase these rights after an initial period of probation as crown tenants.

Already irritated with the government's attempts at interfering in their everyday existence, as well as with the rampant corruption among the lower bureaucracy which used every opportunity provided by the web of regulations to harass them for bribes, fearing that the new law would only add to interference and harassment, angered by the attack on customary laws of inheritance and insecure because of the failure of the cotton crop, their chief commercial crop, in 1905 and 1906, the colonists reacted with a vehemence that took the "paternalist" British administration of Punjab completely by surprise. The initial lead was taken by some "yeoman grantees" belonging to the Bar Zamindar Association, many of whom were also local lawyers and by the *Zamindar* newspaper edited by Siraj-ud-Din Ahmad, who organized mass meetings at which resolutions condemning the Bill

and advocating refusal to pay fines were passed. The numbers attending these meetings grew rapidly and a meeting held at Lyallpur on 3 February 1907 was attended by 10,000 people. A marked feature of the meetings was the participation of Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs and the complete absence of any communal divide.

Agitation intensified further in March and a new element was added by the participation of nationalist leaders and activists from Lahore, such as Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh, who contributed to the movement by sharpening its political focus as well as by popularizing its demands outside the colony areas and thus garnering much-needed support from the urban and rural population of the province as a whole. From April onwards, especially through the efforts of Ajit Singh, the peasants of Amritsar and Lahore also began to voice their protest against the enhanced water rates on the Bari Doab Canal through mass meetings and resolves to refuse to pay the new rates. Meetings were marked by their sharp anti-government tone, by their appeals for maintenance of communal unity and by their appeal to the peasants to stand up for their rights, to protect their self-respect. The movement is also therefore popularly known by the opening line of the poem that became its symbol and was first recited at a mass gathering in Lyallpur in March 1907: "Pagri Sambhal O Jatta" (O Peasant, protect your self-respect).

By the beginning of May, the Government of Punjab was in a panic. A riot in Rawalpindi town on the occasion of the arrest of three leaders who had organized a public meeting to protest against the increase in water rates in Bari Doab Canal and in land revenue and municipal taxes in Rawalpindi strengthened the government's growing conviction that the whole movement was being organized by urban nationalist agitators as part of a conspiracy to overthrow the government. Reports of disaffection spreading among soldiers and ex-soldiers further contributed to the alarmist atmosphere and repression began in earnest. Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh, who were considered the chief conspirators, were deported in May and June, respectively, to Burma. Meetings were banned in five districts, the press was gagged and incitement to non-payment of government dues made a penal offence. Simultaneously, however, independent enquiries directed by Lord Kitchener, the Commander-in-Chief, and conducted by army officers in the affected districts convinced the Government of India that the unrest could not be contained without a retreat on the Colonization Bill and the water rates enhancement and that its repercussions on the loyalty of the soldiers could be serious. The Colonization Bill was thus vetoed by the viceroy and the Punjab Government withdrew the enhancement of water rates. In November, Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh were released. An official enquiry established that the agitation against the enhancement of water

rates was largely justified; and the Colonization Bill that was finally enacted in 1912 was free of almost all the objections raised to its precursor of 1906.

The agitation of 1907 demonstrated to the government the potential of agrarian grievances becoming major issues of agitation unless they were handled with care and that the proverbial "loyalty" of the Punjabi peasants—a loyalty that was essential if the peasant communities were to continue to be designated as "martial races" from which a major component of the British Indian army was recruited—could no longer be taken for granted; it would have to be continually monitored and actively maintained. It was clear that the strategy of "paternalism" evolved in the nineteenth century to contain Punjab was not going to be enough to deal with the potential havoc that could be caused by the new winds of change sweeping the country. The rural masses must be kept isolated from the urban agitators, the carriers of the new ideas, and for this a three-pronged strategy gradually evolved. Its crucial elements were: one, use of severe repression against urban agitators; two, substantial concessions to agrarian demands to prevent the growth of widespread disaffection and maintain the image of "paternalism"; three, strengthening and propagation of the ideology of the urban/rural divide, which could also be translated as the urban Hindu/rural Muslim divide, by continuing the policy framework that underlay the enactment of the Land Alienation Act at the turn of the century and which was to continue to be reflected in later years in the support to and close links with the Unionists as well as in reservations in government jobs for the rural classes, etc. The first two elements of this strategy were clearly reflected in the response to the 1907 agitation, the third was to assume greater prominence in subsequent years.

On their part, the peasants learnt the power of sustained and organized agitation and its capacity to make the authorities concede their demands. They also became familiar with the new ideas of nationalism and representative government emphasized by the nationalist agitators from the towns; and the interest that was taken by people like Lajpat Rai and Ajit Singh in their problems and their willingness to suffer for their sake, became part of the political experience of the peasants. It is not surprising, therefore, that it was Ajit Singh, the man who was the most active in trying to integrate the various sectors of the 1907 agitation and to give it a militant political edge, who became the hero of 1907; the fact that he was an "urban agitator" and not a peasant did not stand in the way of his canonization. This link that was forged between militant nationalism and the peasants' struggle for their rights in 1907 continued to inspire later generations of political activists who in turn ensured that the experience of 1907 remained alive in popular memory as a symbol of militant nationalism *and* peasant resistance.

The Ghadar Movement[3]

The next important movement that was to have a far-reaching impact on the peasants of Punjab was the famous Ghadar Movement of 1914–15. This movement originated among Indian immigrants on the west coast of North America, the vast majority of whom were from the small-holding Sikh peasant families of central Punjab, but also included Indian students and political exiles living in USA. It got its name from a weekly paper, the *Ghadar*, that was brought out from November 1913 by a group of political activists led by Lala Har Dayal, an Indian revolutionary who was in political exile. This paper declared its aim as the overthrow of British rule in India, and was otherwise, too, characterized by a strident nationalist tone, enhanced by the stories of the exploits of Indian revolutionaries like Shyamji Krishna Varma, Tilak, Aurobindo, as well as by the revolutionary poems that were a special feature of the paper. Each issue of the paper carried an indictment of British rule on its front page, an indictment that was based on the economic critique of colonial rule developed by the early nationalists. It also consciously attempted to create a secular consciousness amongst its readers. Since the majority of its readers were Punjabis, it specifically targeted them for appeals to abjure their loyalist past (for example, their role in the Revolt of 1857) and rise in revolt. The paper obviously answered a deeply-felt need among immigrant Indian communities and was avidly read not only in North America but also in the Philippines, the Malay states, China, Hong Kong, Singapore, Burma, Trinidad, the Honduras, etc.; at some places people gathered together regularly to read, discuss and debate the issues raised by the paper and recite the poems it carried.

While the *Ghadar* was busy spreading the message of revolt, the events surrounding the fateful voyage of the ship *Komagata Maru* further inflamed immigrant passions. Already harassed by the increasing restrictions placed by the United States (US) and Canada on Indian immigration with the connivance of the British Government (who did not want Indians to be exposed to the democratic ideas of the West though it had no objections to Indian immigration to Fiji or Africa or the Caribbean), the Indians deeply

[3] I have based my account of the Ghadar Movement on the following: Harish K. Puri, *Ghadar Movement*, Amritsar, 1983; Mark Juergensmeyer, "The Ghadar Syndrome: Immigrant Sikhs and the Nationalist Pride", in Mark Juergensmeyer and N. Gerald Barrier, eds, *Sikh Studies*, Berkeley, 1979; Sohan Singh Josh, *Hindustan Ghadar Party: A Short History*, New Delhi, 1977; Sohan Singh Josh, *Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna: Life of the Founder of the Ghadar Party*, New Delhi, 1970; "Ghadar Conspiracy Report, 1913–16", by Isemonger and Slattery, 1922, reproduced in Bhai Nahar Singh and Kirpal Singh, eds, *Struggle for Free Hindustan (Ghadar Movement)*, Vol. I, 1905–1916, New Delhi, 1986; Satya M. Rai, *Punjabi Heroic Tradition*, pp. 27–75; Master Hari Singh, *Punjabi Peasant in Freedom Struggle,* pp. 31–78; Mridula Mukherjee, "World War I and Indian Nationalism: The Ghadar", in Bipan Chandra, Mridula Mukherjee, Aditya Mukherjee, K.N. Panikkar, Sucheta Mahajan, *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 146–58.

resented the inhuman treatment meted out to a group of 376 Indian passengers aboard the ship, the *Komagata Maru*, who had travelled to Vancouver from various places in southeast and east Asia because of the hope raised by a temporary relaxation of Canadian immigration laws. The Canadian Government refused them entry despite vigorous agitation by resident Indians in Canada and the US, the ship was turned back after days of waiting and, using the excuse of the outbreak of the First World War, the British Government ordered that all passengers aboard the ship, regardless of where they had embarked on their journey, could disembark only at Calcutta. The real reason was of course the fear that the passengers had been infected by *Ghadar* propaganda and were therefore "dangerous", and that this was a neat way of catching them all at once. The return journey of the ship was therefore marked by growing resentment and anger among Indians at every place where the ship stopped but its passengers refused permission to leave. The final act in the drama was enacted at Budge Budge near Calcutta where the irate passengers engaged the police that had been detailed to detain them in a bloody brawl, which left 18 of the passengers dead and 202 under arrest, while a few escaped.

The outbreak of the First World War had also placed the Ghadar leaders in a dilemma. This was the opportunity they had been waiting for, since it was obvious that the best time for a revolt in India was when the British had their hands full with the War, but they were not yet quite ready—their organization in India was almost non-existent and they had no arms. Despite these limitations, however, the Ghadar leadership gave the call for a war on the British. Indians abroad were asked to return home, lack of time and organization were to be made up by zeal and lack of arms by organizing mutinies in the Indian army. The remarkable fact was that 8,000 Indians actually heeded the call and returned home and the vast majority of these were Punjabi Sikhs. The Government of India was, however, better prepared and systematically intercepted the returning emigrants, separated the "dangerous" ones and interned them or restricted their movements. A few of the "dangerous" ones escaped detection.

But the Punjab of 1914 was very different from what the Ghadarites had expected—the Punjabis were in no mood to join their romantic adventure. They tried their best; they toured the villages, addressed gatherings at *melas* and festivals—all to no avail. The chief Khalsa diwan, proclaiming its loyalty to the British sovereign, declared them to be "fallen" Sikhs and helped the government to track them down. Efforts at getting the soldiers to mutiny were equally unsuccessful. Further efforts at revolts, which included inviting Rash Behari Bose, the famous Bengali revolutionary terrorist, to assume the leadership—which he did in January 1915—and establishment of contacts with numerous army units, also proved futile since the British had succeeded in penetrating the organization upto the highest level. Most

of the leaders were arrested and severe repression launched. Conspiracy trials led to the execution of 45 revolutionaries and long years of imprisonment for over 200 others.

Despite its apparent failure, the Ghadar Movement was to have a powerful impact on Punjab politics and especially on the peasants. It established a tradition of militant and secular anti-imperialism, enriched in subsequent years by social radicalism, which was to continue to inspire subsequent generations. The movement threw up a committed leadership which, despite the tremendous depletion of its ranks due to repression, played a crucial role in the development of the peasant movement from the 1920s to the 1940s. In fact, one can speculate that had it been possible to avoid this tremendous loss of valuable human resources, the impact of the Ghadar Movement, especially in strengthening the secular and radical anti-imperialist forces, would have been even more powerful. This in no way belittles, however, the contribution of the movement in carrying forward the process of anti-imperialist politicization and mobilization in the province. The Ghadar experience also showed up the difficulties and consequences of attempts at armed revolt and thus contributed to the accumulation of a political experience which pointed towards the adoption of other, more effective forms of protest and struggle.

The Akali Movement: 1920–25[4]

The Akali Movement or the movement for reform of the Sikh shrines or gurdwaras which lasted from 1920 to 1925 was of profound significance, as it was the harbinger of a democratic, anti-feudal and anti-imperialist consciousness among the vast mass of the Sikh peasantry of central Punjab. Its central aim, that gurdwaras must be managed by the popularly elected representatives of the Sikhs and not by the corrupt, feudal-style *mahants* or priests, or by the government or its representatives, though obviously religious in form, had a clear democratic and anti-feudal message. And as the struggle developed and the British lined up behind the loyalist priests, the anti-imperialist focus of the movement also grew sharper.

Since the eighteenth century, the gurdwaras had been managed by Udasi Sikh *mahants* who had escaped the wrath of the Mughals because, though Sikhs, they did not wear their hair long. In the course of time, many gurdwaras had also acquired large areas of land as grants from various Sikh rulers, chieftains and other devout Sikhs. The *mahants* increasingly started treating those lands and the offerings at the gurdwaras as their personal

[4] I have based my account of the Akali movement on the following: Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*; Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab: Culture in the Making*, Berkeley, 1985, pp. 78–104; K.L. Tuteja, *Sikh Politics, 1920–1940*, Kurukshetra, 1984, pp. 29–134; Satya M. Rai, *Punjabi Heroic Tradition*, pp. 132–46; Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, pp. 101–31.

income and many of them also lived luxurious and dissipated lives, thus losing the respect of the people. They also acted as stooges of the British and preached loyalty to them. The growing anger against the *mahants* among Sikh nationalists and reformers came to a boiling point first when the priests of the Golden Temple at Amritsar declared Ghadar revolutionaries as "fallen" Sikhs or renegades and then when they specially honoured the notorious General Dyer (who was responsible for the Jallianwala Bagh massacre of 1919) and even declared him a Sikh.

The movement began in 1920 with the organization of *jathas* or groups of volunteers whose task was to liberate the gurdwaras from the control of the *mahants* and government-appointed managers. The government had not yet decided on a clear policy nor was it aware of the potential strength of the movement. Consequently, not wanting to alienate the reformers at this stage, it allowed the control of many gurdwaras to fall into the hands of the reformers. Encouraged by the easy early success, especially on the question of the control of the Golden Temple and Akal Takht at Amritsar, the movement surged forward. The *mahant* of the gurdwara at Nankana, Guru Nanak's birth place, however, had different ideas. When a *jatha* of Akali volunteers entered the gurdwara on 21 February 1921 to pray, he ordered his band of 500 armed mercenaries to open fire and attack the *jatha*. Nearly 100 Akalis were killed in the process and the incident immediately attracted nation-wide attention. The Akalis succeeded in wresting control of the gurdwara by continuing to send *jathas*, but the experience had transformed the perceptions of the nature of the struggle. After this, the Akali Movement moved closer to the ongoing Non-cooperation Movement and not only adopted many items of its programme, such as boycott of British goods and liquor and setting up of panchayats in place of British courts, but also accepted its emphasis on non-violence.

The next major round was a test of strength with the government in October 1921 over what came to be known as the "Keys Affair", and ultimately the government relented, handed over the keys to the *toshakhana* of the Golden Temple and released all the Akali prisoners arrested in that connection. Having stemmed the rapidly growing discontent by making concessions at a time when the entire country was charged with anti-British feeling and when therefore it was necessary to follow a conciliatory policy, the government decided to strike back when the nation-wide upsurge had subsided. In August 1922, a confrontation developed between the Akalis and the *mahant* of Guru-ka-Bagh Gurdwara near Amritsar over control of the lands attached to the gurdwara. The Akalis, who had already gained control of the gurdwara, cut some firewood from the disputed land. The *mahant* reported a theft to the police, who promptly came and arrested the Akalis and put them on trial. At this, *jathas* began to arrive and cut trees from the disputed land. The government arrested 4000 Akalis, but then

suddenly changed track and decided to order beating up of the *jathas* with *lathis*. In subsequent days, Guru-Ka-Bagh was witness to the most harrowing scenes of police brutality and the most heroic examples of non-violent resistance. Countrywide condemnation followed and the government was again forced to retreat. Another big struggle took place at Jaito in Nabha after the Akalis took up the cause of the Maharaja of Nabha who they believed had been deposed because of his pro-Akali sympathies. The response was not as powerful as in the case of Guru-Ka-Bagh, nor was it crowned with similar success.

Meanwhile, the government had also begun the process of weaning away the moderate section of the Akalis by the offer of legislation which would grant their main demand of democratic popular control over the gurdwaras. It had simultaneously launched an ideological onslaught on the movement by directing local officials to assist in the formation of *sudhar* or reform committees with local notables at their head and use them for carrying the official point of view to the people—a move that was not without success. Through this policy of propaganda, negotiation with moderates and isolation of extremists—the main architect of which was Malcom Hailey, who assumed the office of governor of Punjab in 1924—the Akali Movement was ultimately contained by 1925.

After this, the activists of the movement divided into three broad political trends. Many of the more moderate and loyalist elements whose goal had remained confined to gurdwara reform returned to loyalist and moderate politics and allied with other similar-minded men to strengthen the emerging Unionist Party. A second stream that was clearly nationalist in its ideological orientation, and for whom the struggle for gurdwara reform was only one battle in the ongoing war for Indian freedom, merged with the mainstream national movement, some joining its Gandhian wing and others moving towards the more radical emerging trends represented in Punjab by the Kirti-Kisans and Communists. The third group, which kept the nomenclature of Akali, gradually acquired communal overtones and increasingly became the political organ of Sikh communalism. This group, however, largely because of the prestige of the Akali Movement to which it claimed sole rights, retained considerable popularity among the rural Sikh masses. Besides, within this group as well, there were some who were more militant and nationalistically-inclined and others who were moderate and communally-inclined, and the former tended to often team up with nationalist and left currents for expressing peasant grievances and during major national struggles. For the other group as well, the loyalist logic of its communal approach did not fully unfold till the 1940s, and it continued in the 1920s and 1930s to vacillate between nationalism and loyalism. The reason for our dealing at some length with the subsequent political choices of those who emerged as leaders in the Akali Movement is because these choices

had profound effects on the subsequent politics of the peasants as well, as will become apparent in the following pages.

The Akali Movement had succeeded in mobilizing a broad front of all sections of Sikhs, urban as well as rural, as well as in gaining the sympathy and at times even participation of other religious groups such as Hindus and Muslims. Nevertheless, it is accepted beyond doubt that its main base was among the Sikh peasantry of Punjab, including the Princely States. The scale of this mobilization was remarkable indeed—all told 30,000 went to jail and of these the vast majority were peasants. An estimate made of the strength of the Akali *jathas* in early 1922 placed the total number, excluding the Princely States and south-west and south-east Punjab, at 15,506 of whom 10,200 were Jats (the major landowning caste of the Punjab) and another 2,399 were menials (the non-landowning artisan and labouring castes). Besides these activists, there were obviously thousands who participated by feeding the *jathas*, making other contributions, attending meetings and the like. The main strength of the movement was in the districts of Lahore, Amritsar, Sheikhupura, Gurdaspur, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur and Lyallpur, as also in the Princely States of Kapurthala, Patiala and Nabha, all in central Punjab. The significance of the politicization achieved by the Akali Movement becomes immediately apparent when we find that it is this area that was to remain the main base of the subsequent national and peasant struggles as well. The struggles for reform of the gurdwaras thus performed for the Sikh peasantry the task that was performed for most other regions of the country by the Non-Cooperation Movement: the task of awakening them to modern, democratic and nationalist consciousness and organization.

The Babbar Akali Movement[5]

A few groups of militant Sikhs had broken away from the mainstream of the Akali Movement in early 1921 and by 1922 had united and formed what came to be known as the Babbar Akali *Jatha*. Their main difference at that stage with the Akali leadership was over the latter's insistence on non-violence, as they believed that only armed revolt could win against the British. They also believed in using terror to pressurize the loyalist elements and frighten the officials. Organizing themselves into an armed band, these militant Akalis carried on their activities mainly in the districts of

[5] I have based my account of the Babbar Akalis on the following: Susana B.C. Devalle and Harjot S. Oberoi, "Sacred Shrines, Secular Protest and Peasant Participation: The Babbar Akalis Reconsidered", *Punjab Journal of Politics*, 7, 2, July–December 1983, pp. 27–62; Kamlesh Mohan, *Militant Nationalism in the Punjab, 1919–1935*, New Delhi, 1985, pp. 41–77; Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, pp. 113–62; Satya M. Rai, *Punjabi Heroic Tradition*, pp. 77–84; Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, pp. 133–49; Richard G. Fox, *Lions of the Punjab*, p. 92.

Jullundur and Hoshiarpur. They killed informers, officials and ex-officials. They brought out an illegal newssheet in which they talked of British exploitation of India, the misery of the peasantry and the need to drive out the British by force. Their activity was at its height in 1922 and 1923 and in this period they obviously enjoyed considerable support and sympathy from the peasants of the area, as is evident from the ease with which they operated their guerilla-style movement and the reluctance and even refusal of the people to divulge information and to cooperate with the police in running them down.

The Babbar Akali *Jatha* had many returned emigrants of the Ghadar Party in its ranks, and the prestige of the Ghadar Party, born out of the heroic sacrifices of its members, undoubtedly helped in establishing the popularity of the Babbar Akalis. Besides returned emigrants, the activists of the Babbar Akali Movement were chiefly ex-soldiers, many of whom had been demobilized at the end of the First World War and were disgruntled with the British for their failure to keep the war-time promises of grants of lands and other rewards. The war had also meant for them an exposure to the world. They had fought in the battlefields of Europe and the Middle East and had in the process picked up new ideas, were more self-assured and also found it difficult to return to the traditional family occupation of small peasant farming. Interestingly, the Babbar Akalis also attracted to themselves some groups of dacoits or bandits who, inspired by the Babbar example, decided to direct their activities towards a wider social and political cause.

It is also significant that the Babbar Akalis, while continuing to support the aims of gurdwara reform, placed much greater emphasis on the anti-British part of their objectives than many Akalis. They addressed, in however rudimentary a fashion, the economic grievances of the peasantry, some-thing which the Akali Movement failed to do. The fact that their ideological discourse was replete with religious imagery and that the notions of the loss of "Sikh" sovereignty and of the need to assert the "Sikh" identity were its constituent parts only points to the inevitable transitional stage spanned by anti-colonial peasant-based movements of the time as well as, of course, to the necessity of further ideological development before such movements could command the maturity and sophistication necessary for handling the complex modern world in which they were situated.

Besides the groups and parties that emerged out of the movements discussed here, a number of other political parties and groups were active in organizing and mobilizing the peasants in our period and we present next a brief political profile of these parties and groups in the 1920s.

The Punjab National Unionist Party[6]

This party, popularly known as the Unionist Party, which was to crucially influence Punjab politics almost till Independence, was a product of the peculiar contours of British colonial policies and ideologies in Punjab. Though it formally emerged as a party in 1923 at the time of the second elections to the Punjab Legislative Council held under the Reform Act of 1919, the ground for its existence was created by the manner in which the 1919 Reforms were applied in the province. Unlike other provinces, where the division of the seats and the electorate was primarily on a communal or caste basis, in Punjab a further division on a rural/urban basis was introduced *within* the communal division. This was in keeping with the ideology and policy of Punjab officialdom embodied in the Land Alienation Act of 1900 which in the name of protecting the "agriculturists" from the "nonagriculturists" had fostered a new cleavage in Punjab society which turned out to be as useful for the British in Punjab as their other favourite cleavage along religious lines was in the country as a whole.

The significance and possibilities of the new electoral arithmetic created by this division were first grasped by Fazl-i-Husain, a man of considerable political ambition and acumen, who had parted company with the Congress and the Khilafatists when they adopted the policy of Non-cooperation. He was elected to the Punjab Legislative Council in 1921 and was appointed a Minister under the new scheme of dyarchy. He soon saw that even if he secured the complete support of all the Muslim members, which he did since he had emerged as a major spokesman of moderate and loyalist Muslim opinion in the Punjab, he still could not command a majority in the Council, whereas if he could organize the rural members, Muslim and non-Muslim, into a solid bloc, he could easily get a majority. He could also count on many of the urban Muslims supporting this bloc, since the preponderance of Muslim members in the rural bloc would ensure that the bloc would generally work to protect communal Muslim interests. To facilitate such a combination, he emphasized that the idea was to unite all backward classes and groups, and that Muslims and agriculturists were both backward.

Thus, from 1921 itself, Fazl-i-Husain began in the Council the process of organizing what was first called the Rural Bloc, then the Rural Party and

[6] This introductory account of the Unionist Party is based on my reading of the primary sources as well as on some published works. It is not possible to cite the primary sources at this stage nor is it necessary as they will be cited in due course. The important published works that have been used, however, are the following: Azim Husain, *Fazl-i-Husain: A Political Biography*, Bombay, 1946; Prem Chowdhry, *Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram*, New Delhi, 1984; Satya M. Rai, *Legislative Politics and the Freedom Struggle in the Panjab, 1897–1947*, New Delhi, 1984; Kripal C. Yadav, *Elections in Punjab, 1920–1947*, Tokyo, 1981; Madan Gopal, *Sir Chhotu Ram: A Political Biography*, Delhi, 1977.

later the Punjab National Unionist Party. Besides, the time he chose for pushing forward this process was a particularly suitable one, since the elections on the basis of which this Council was constituted had been boycotted by the Congress and the Khilafatists. Consequently, the elections had been fought totally on a non-party basis and the type of men who were elected to the Council were of a particularly loyalist variety and those who might have offered some opposition were absent. By the time the next elections came around in 1923, he had succeeded in consolidating this group into a party. The inability of the nationalist elements to present a united front, now that they were back in the electoral fray, also worked to Fazl-i-Husain's advantage. The Congress was split between the Swarajists who wanted to contest elections and the no-changers who did not, and the Swarajists were therefore unable to bring the whole weight of the Congress to bear on their electoral mobilization; the communal amity of the Non-Cooperation days was already breaking up as was shown by the outbreak of communal riots in Punjab in 1922 and 1923; the Hindu traders, merchants, professionals and educated groups, who might otherwise have supported the Swarajists, were increasingly turning to communal Hindu organizations to counter the perceived threat from the pro-Muslim and pro-agriculturist policies, especially reservations in educational institutions and government services, promoted by Fazl-i-Husain in collusion with the government. As a result, the Unionist Party was able to command a majority in the second Council and get two of its members appointed as ministers, one being Fazl-i-Husain and the other Lal Chand, a Jat agriculturist from Rohtak District in southeast Punjab. The latter, however, had to soon resign his post as he lost his seat due to a successful election petition against him, and Chhotu Ram, another Jat agriculturist from Rohtak, was appointed in his place. Interestingly, Chhotu Ram had been from 1921–23 a bitter critic of Fazl-i-Husain's pro-Muslim policies but now seized the opportunity of emerging in place of Lal Chand as the leader of the Jat Hindu agriculturists of southeast Punjab with the aid of his official position and the anti-urban, anti-*bania* ideology of the Unionist Party. In fact, he remained from this time the most important non-Muslim leader of the Unionist Party.

In the next Council, formed in 1926, Fazl-i-Husain was shifted to the "reserved" side of the government and made revenue member, which meant that he no longer represented the elected members, and an "urban" Hindu and a "rural" Sikh, both non-Unionists, were made ministers. This was done because the Governor, Malcolm Hailey, felt that the Unionists should not be allowed to become too powerful as this could prove difficult in case they pressed strongly for measures such as reduction of agricultural taxation which could upset the provincial finances. He also wanted to

conciliate the more loyalist and communal elements among the "urban" Hindus who felt that only government support could save them from the "excesses" of the Muslim majority in the Punjab and were willing to trade loyalty for protection. But the Unionist Party agitated and was able to secure the appointment of Firoz Khan Noon, a "rural" Unionist, as a third minister. However, the Unionist position was no longer as strong as it had been in the second Council from 1924–26, and this had predictable effects on the unity of a party whose members had come together largely to be able to partake of the fruits of power and office. Factions grew, rifts developed and the party was torn by personal, family, communal and urban/rural rivalries. As a result, in the next elections in 1930, its strength diminished and the government again conceded only one minister to the party. However, it continued its policy of having a Unionist Muslim as revenue member, and Sikander Hayat Khan, a scion of one of the biggest landowning families of west Punjab, was appointed to this post in place of Fazl-i-Husain, who was elevated to the Viceroy's Executive Council in 1930. This situation continued till the grant of provincial autonomy under the Government of India Act of 1935 and the consequent elections of 1936 gave the Unionists a clear majority and enabled them to form their own ministry, thus entering a qualitatively new stage which we shall discuss at length in later chapters.

The leaders of the Unionist Party were in the habit of making loud claims that theirs was a truly non-communal party constituted on purely economic lines and that all communities were represented in its ranks. The hollowness of their claims was to become increasingly clear from the late 1930s and 1940s when Muslim communalism acquired an aggressive posture under Jinnah's leadership and many of the Muslim Unionists began to fall prey to Jinnah's expansionist designs. But even earlier, the fact that Chhotu Ram, who was recognized officially as the leader of the Unionist Party since 1926, was consistently forced to surrender his claims to office—in 1927, 1930, and 1936 to ministership and again on Sikandar Hayat Khan's death in 1942 to premiership—in favour of a Unionist Muslim, speaks volumes for the pro-Muslim communal bias of the party.

At the ideological plane as well, communal categories were freely used. For example, anti-urban or anti-non-agriculturist was usually translated as anti-Hindu at the popular level by the Muslim leaders, taking advantage of the fact that moneylenders and traders were mostly Hindu. Chhotu Ram, who could obviously not use the same translation, as his constituency was that of Jat landowners, adopted a casteist translation: Jats versus *Banias* (*Banias* being the trading and moneylending case in southeast Punjab). This variety of ideological formations—communalism, casteism, anti-urbanism, etc.—was held together by the overarching ideological

framework of furthering the interests of the backward elements vis-à-vis the advanced elements. This overarching framework also provided the basis for co-operation with the government and opposition to the nationalist politics of the Congress, since the special protection of the government was considered essential for promoting the interests of backward groups and classes, and any strengthening of the allegedly urban Hindu-dominated Congress was declared to be not to their advantage. This framework ideally suited the conservative and loyalist predilections of the landowning and communal elements, and loyalty was not without its benefits. As we noted earlier, Fazl-i-Husain was first nominated as revenue member in Punjab and then a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council. Sikandar Hayat Khan became revenue member in 1930 and then was sent as deputy governor of the Reserve Bank, before being brought back as premier of Punjab in 1937. Firoz Khan Noon ended up as the high commissioner in London. Along with high office, came titles, honours and grants of land. For the government, the utility of having a bulwark against the growth of nationalist forces was apparent enough and a bulwark that was not overtly communal had obvious advantages in the context of the army recruited largely from Punjab—from among Muslims as well as Hindus and Sikhs.

As far as the peasant movement is concerned, the Unionists worked primarily through the Punjab Zamindar League, an organization set up by Chhotu Ram in 1924. Unlike the majority of the Muslim landlord members of the Unionist Party hailing from west Punjab, who could rely on the backwardness and traditional loyalty of their tenants (most of whom were also Muslim) to retain their influence and had thus no need for populism till pretty late in the day, Chhotu Ram knew that he had to continually fight his way if he was to be able to resist nationalist and left influence on his constituency and that for this a certain amount of populism was essential. He used the Zamindar League as the vehicle for mobilization on issues which affected the peasants and since he was unencumbered by office from 1927 to 1936 he was also free to adopt a strident tone. Besides, there were many demands which were in the interest of all landowners, big or small and on these he could be vociferous in his pro-peasant rhetoric without in any way threatening landlord interests. The Zamindar League also had the advantage of being able to claim that it had the ear of the government, and that it could use the weight of the Unionists in the Council to press for concessions; it also suited the government to project that it was granting concessions because of Unionist pressure rather than to have the people believe that it was succumbing to nationalist or left pressure. As a result, the Zamindar League was able to establish, at least initially, till the competition from nationalist and left-wing peasant organizations emerged, some influence on the peasantry.

The Congress[7]

In the mid-1920s, the Congress party in Punjab was in none too good a shape. During the Non-Cooperation days, the initial doubts and reservations expressed by Lala Lajpat Rai and some others regarding the wisdom of a policy of boycott had melted away and the organization had succeeded in presenting a united front and running a successful campaign. Its success, however, had been much more in the towns than in the villages, barring a few pockets in southeast and central Punjab and the predominantly Muslim areas of west Punjab had remained untouched by either the Congress or the Khilafat Movement. The Sikh peasants of central Punjab had indeed experienced a considerable degree of anti-imperialist politicization, but this was largely under the aegis of the Akali leadership and organization and the Congress has not much direct claim to their loyalty. As noted earlier, the Akalis divided themselves in the mid-1920s into three broad political trends, and of these only one identified itself clearly with the Congress. Nevertheless, by the end of the Non-Cooperation Movement, Congress prestige in the province was considerable.

From 1922 onwards, however, various factors contributed to a decline in its position. Congressmen themselves divided into Swarajists and No-changers, the former arguing in favour of entering the Councils and the latter in favour of mass constructive work. But the real blow to the Congress was struck by communalism. Communal riots broke out in many Punjab towns and added to the feeling of insecurity engendered among urban Hindus by Fazl-i-Husain's policy of reservations for Muslims in services and educational institutions. So strong was the pull of communalism that even a stalwart like Lala Lajpat Rai began to fall prey to it along with many lesser men. This inevitably led to a loss of influence among those Muslims who had united with Hindus and Sikhs during the Non-Cooperation days. Hindus and Sikhs, on their part, felt that the communal organizations could protect their interests better than the Congress. Matters came to a head in 1926 when Lala Lajpat Rai, under pressure from the secular and radical elements in the Congress led by Satyapal who were unhappy with his communal bias and especially with his participation in Hindu *sangathan* activities, resigned from the Congress and joined Madan Mohan Malaviya to form the Independent Congress Party. This split in the Congress ranks, though a victory for the secular forces, in the short run at least led to a

[7] Since secondary sources on the Congress in Punjab are almost non-existent, I have based this study almost entirely on primary sources for this introductory account. Given the wide range of the sources, citation is not possible at this stage and will be done in due course; the sources, however, include the Hailey Papers, Government of India records in the Home Department, the fortnightly reports from Punjab to the Government of India in the Home Department, *The Tribune* newspaper and the like.

decline in Congress influence, for the loss of a leader of Lajpat Rai's stature was no small loss.

An index of the weakness of the Congress is provided by the fact that in February 1927 the president of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee announced that due to lack of funds he was being forced to dispense with all the paid Congress workers and discharge all the head office staff. This, commented a government report, was a result of the decline in its prestige due to dissensions.

The announcement of the all-White Simon Commission in November 1927 led to new efforts at unity, and though these were quite successful, the time for organization was short, and the country-wide boycott announced for 3 February 1928, the day Simon set foot on Indian soil, met with a relatively lukewarm response in the province. But later in the year, when the Simon Commission reached Lahore, a very successful demonstration was organized on 30 October with Lala Lajpat Rai at its head. A vicious *lathi*-charge by the police on the demonstration led to injuries to many of the senior leaders and Lala Lajpat Rai succumbed to these on 17 November. This led to a mass outrage, and his death was avenged by Bhagat Singh and his comrades of the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha (NJBS), a youth organization whose members had earlier denounced Lajpat Rai in the strongest terms for his communal outlook. They shot dead on December 17 a white police official they suspected had been responsible for Lajpat Rai's death.

A new atmosphere, reflective of a new wave of struggle, had been born and throughout 1929 nationalist feeling was on the upswing and the Congress was regaining its position. Organizational activity was stepped up, members enrolled, volunteers enlisted and trained and political conferences and propaganda tours organized. The annual session of the Congress for 1929 was held at Lahore and its declaration of complete independence and its call for a movement of civil disobedience set the stage for a new phase of struggle, with which we shall engage ourselves later.

Left-Wing Groups and Parties[8]

As elsewhere in the country, the 1920s were witness to the emergence in Punjab of new left-wing ideological currents, largely under the influence of the Russian Revolution which fired the imagination of many young

[8] For this account of the emergence of left-wing parties and groups in the Punjab, I have used both primary and secondary sources, but for reasons already stated, the primary sources will be cited in due course. The most useful secondary sources are the following: Kamlesh Mohan, *Militant Nationalism in the Punjab*; Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab*, Delhi, 1979; and Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*.

nationalists by opening up new vistas of human liberation. They were attracted both by the staunch anti-imperialism of the new Soviet regime, as well as by the idea of ending all exploitation of man by man. The Soviet Communists also declared their support to all anti-imperialist movements for national liberation. The Third Communist International (Comintern) was set up to act as the centre of the Communist Movement in the world and guide and extend support to Communists the world over. M.N. Roy, an Indian ex-revolutionary terrorist, was in Moscow and playing an active role in the deliberations of the Comintern. In 1920, he along with seven other Indians founded a Communist Party of India (CPI) in Tashkent. One of these seven was Muhammad Ali, who had left Lahore for Kabul in 1915 as part of a group of 15 Muslim college students. These students were *muhajirs* or emigrants who under the influence of the pan-Islamic movement (which later took the form of the Khilafat Movement) had come to believe that it was their religious duty to refuse to 1ive under the rule of an infidel who did not protect their religious rights and that they should go on *hijrat* (emigrate) and launch a *jehad* against the infidel rulers. These *muhajirs* had also participated in the "Provisional Government of India" set up in Kabul in 1915 by the revolutionary adventurer, Raja Mahendra Pratap. Muhammad Ali and another *muhajir*, Rahmat Ali Zakaria, became Communists and played an active role in Indian Communist activities abroad, especially in running the Kabul centre which maintained links with the Punjab Communists.

A second group of *muhajirs* inspired by the Khilafat Movement who had left India reached Tashkent in late 1920 and joined M.N. Roy's CPI, and received training in Tashkent and Moscow. Among these were three who were to play an active role in the left movement in the Punjab: Ferozuddin Mansoor, M.A. Majid and Fazal Ilahi Qurban. When members of this group tried to return to India, they were arrested and tried in a series of four Peshawar conspiracy cases between 1921 and 1924.

Another group emerged in Lahore in 1922 from within the country as part of the efforts of M.N. Roy and others to set up communist groups in various cities. Ghulam Hussain, Shamsuddin Hassan and M.A. Khan formed this group and even brought out a journal in Urdu called *Inquilab* for some time, which mostly reproduced M.N. Roy's writings. The Kabul centre of the CPI was in touch with this group and even helped them financially. When the different Communist groups in various parts of the country were brought together by Singaravelu in the "Labour and Kisan Party of Hindustan", the Lahore group also affiliated itself to this organization. The main activity of this group was among labour, especially in the North-western Railway Workers Union, but Ghulam Hussain's arrest and his subsequent betrayal in agreeing to give evidence against other Communists and asking for a pardon were a severe blow to this group.

Meanwhile, the Ghadar Party of America had also established links with Soviet Communists and two of its representatives, Rattan Singh and Santokh Singh, attended the Fourth Congress of the Comintern in 1922. Santokh Singh, a founder-member of the Ghadar Party, had already become a communist in the United States, and spearheaded the effort to find an alternative after the Ghadar debacle of 1914–15. Having made arrangements for the training of Ghadar Party activists in Moscow in the "University of the Toilers of the East" and having established an independent link with the Comintern, which was not mediated by M.N. Roy, Santokh Singh returned to India in 1923. He was interned in his village for two years, but used the time to study the political situation. At the end of those two years, he moved to Amritsar and, along with other members of the Ghadar Party such as Bhag Singh Canadian and Karam Singh Cheema, started the *Kirti*, a monthly paper in Gurumukhi and Urdu, in February 1926. The *Kirti* or "Worker" was meant to be the vehicle for carrying the new Marxist ideological framework to the people. Santokh Singh unfortunately fell seriously ill in August 1926, could no longer run the paper and died in May 1927. But he had succeeded in establishing a nucleus around which radical-minded individuals continued to coalesce.

Under Santokh Singh's stewardship, the main emphasis of the *Kirti* was on the need for a workers' organization, on news of workers' movements, etc., and there was very little practical concern with the peasantry except for the argument that land must be nationalized and small peasant holdings were uneconomical. There was no discussion about the need to organize the peasants, or how they could play a role in the revolutionary movement. In April 1927, however, for the first time, there was a mention of the need to form a Kirti Kisan (Workers' and Peasants') Party. This was possibly due to the fact that, since January 1927, Sohan Singh Josh had assumed charge of the paper and he was responding to the current Communist trend in other parts of the country where Workers' and Peasants' Parties had begun to be formed since the beginning of 1927. In September of 1927, the government reported that a "Peasants' and Workers' Party" had been formed by extremist Sikhs connected with the *Kirti* magazine of Amritsar. This "party" was reported to have held meetings at Hoshiarpur on 5 and 6 October 1927 along with the session of the Central Sikh League. However, while indeed a group had started functioning and the conference was also held, a formal party was only founded on 12 April 1928 in Amritsar when 60 persons gathered at the invitation of Sohan Singh Josh and Bhag Singh Canadian. Josh and M.A. Majid were elected secretary and joint secretary, and Kedar Nath Sehgal, M.A. Majid, Gopal Singh Quami, Hira Singh Dard and Sohan Singh Josh formed a committee to frame the rules of the party. The meeting was also attended by Dr Satyapal, Raizada Hans Raj, Ferozuddin Mansoor and Master Kabul Singh.

The emergence of the Kirti Kisan Party also coincided with the revival of the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha (NJBS), originally founded in Lahore in March 1926, by a group of radical youth—Bhagat Singh, Sukhdev, Bhagwati Charan Vohra and Ram Kishan—influenced by the revolutionary terrorist movement led by the Hindustan Republican Association, as a forum for the mass organization of youth. In its early phase, which lasted from March 1926 till mid-1927, the Sabha had mainly been active in organizing a series of public meetings in Lahore addressed by speakers with generally left-wing views. Its revival in April 1928 was partly at least due to the efforts of the Kirti group and in this latter phase many of the leaders of the Kirti Kisan Party and the NJBS were the same—Sohan Singh Josh, Kedar Nath Sehgal, M.A. Majid, for example—though organizationally the two remained separate. Government reports also suggest that the Kirti Kisan Party, which had more money, was hesitant about funding the activities of the NJBS because of its anarchist leanings and strong anti-religious and anti-communal tone.

However, regardless of the organizational differences, what is important for our purposes is that by 1928 a distinct left-wing trend had come into existence in the Punjab and within this the Kirti Kisan Party and the NJBS were the most important. This left-wing trend also had close links with the Congress, and most of its leaders also functioned simultaneously as what were called "extremist Congressmen". It was this group that was responsible, for example, for Lala Lajpat Rai's exit from the Congress on grounds of encouraging communal tendencies. This group was also the main force behind organizing the boycott of the Simon Commission, protests on the *lathi*-charge on the leaders, on Lajpat Rai's death and the like. They had also been active in organizing meetings to express solidarity with the Bardoli Struggle. In July 1929, Congress leaders cooperated with the NJBS to celebrate Bhagat Singh–Dutt Day and collect money for the Lahore Conspiracy Case Defence Fund. In September 1928 and March 1929, the Kirti Kisan Party held its conferences along with the Provincial Political Conferences organized by the Congress at Lyallpur and Rohtak respectively.

Thus, both by creating new left-wing organizations as well as by increasing left-wing influence over the Provincial Congress, the emerging left trend created a climate that was conducive to the organization of peasants for their own demands and in their own organizations. To this left trend were attracted the most militant and staunchly anti-imperialist elements that had emerged from the Ghadar, Non-Cooperation, Khilafat and Akali Movements. And in course of time, it was this trend that emerged as the most powerful and active mobilizer of the peasant movements in Punjab.

Two

Emergence of Modern Peasant Organizations and Fashioning a Peasant Agenda, 1924–29

In this chapter, I discuss the process of the emergence of the modern peasant movement in Punjab, the efforts of different groups to form province-wide organizations, extend existing peasant organizations, conduct agitations and struggles on specific issues and demands, as well as the evolution of a consensus around some basic issues. This takes us roughly through the years 1924–29. In 1930, we enter a qualitatively new phase in the development of the peasant movement with the onset of the world economic depression and the launching of the Civil Disobedience Movement.

Peasants' Protest Against the Enhancement of Water Rates: 1924–25

The curtain-raiser to this first phase is provided by the agitation for the cancellation of an enhancement in the *abiana* or canal water rates, which lasted from 1924 to 1925. In March 1924, the Government of Punjab announced an increase in the water rates amounting to roughly Rs 7.5 million. This was the parting gift of Maclagan, the Governor of the province, who left immediately afterwards, bequeathing to the new incumbent, Malcolm Hailey, an old Punjab hand, an unresolved Akali agitation and the prospect of a new agitation on the issue of the canal or water rates.[1] The government had already been warned against the wisdom of such a step,

[1] Fortnightly Report on the Political Situation in the Punjab, second half of April, 1924, *Home Department, Political Branch*, Government of India, File No. 25/1924, National Archives of India, New Delhi. (Hereafter Fortnightly Reports will be referred to as FR, the first or second half of the month will be indicated by (1) or (2), and Home Department, Political Branch, abbreviated to *H.P.*) Also see Hailey to Sir Campbell Rhodes, 16 November 1924, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/6(c) , India Office Library and Records, London.

both by its own members, such as Sunder Singh Majithia as well as by members of the Legislative Council.[2] The canals already earned a profit of 12 per cent annually, and it was pointed out that anything more would be usurious as well as beyond the capacity of the cultivators. The dangers of supplying the agitators with a new grievance had also been pointed out, but the government nevertheless went ahead.[3]

As the news of the increase became public and trickled down to the districts and the villages, murmurs and whispers of protest became increasingly audible. The first reports of meetings of protest began to come in around May 1924[4] and on 7 June there was an important meeting in Lyallpur to protest against the enhancement which was attended by roughly 2,000 people, including a large number of Akalis.[5] By early July, several districts reported that meetings of protest had been held. Deputations of agriculturists also met the local authorities, as in Lyallpur.[6] The government was apprehensive that the Akalis might use this opportunity to fuel unrest among peasants[7]; and for a while their fear appeared to be coming true as reports came in of the issue being raised at Akali *dewans* (religious meetings) and in the Legislative Council and of suggestions of non-payment of dues in Akali papers.[8] But the initiative for organizing the protest came not from the Akalis, as the government expected, but from the Congress.

In July 1924, the provincial Congress appointed a sub-committee headed by its secretary, Dr Satyapal, a man known for his militant stance, to explore the possibilities of agitation against the enhanced *abiana* rates.[9] Following this, a number of meetings were organized in different parts of the province, with audiences ranging from 300–400 in the smaller meetings to 2,000 in the larger ones, at many of which resolutions asking the Congress to intervene in the matter and for adoption of "all peaceful and legitimate means" to secure redressal were passed. The speeches at these meetings were described as "seditious" and "mischievous" by the government; and there were apparently also references to the weapon of civil disobedience.[10]

[2] See, for example, *Sardar Sunder Singh Majithia Papers*, F. 48, Nehru Memorial Museum and Library, New Delhi; and *Punjab Legislative Council Debates* (henceforth PLCD), Vol. V, 21 March 1923.
[3] *ibid*.
[4] FR(2) May 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924.
[5] FR(1) June 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924.
[6] FR(1) July 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924.
[7] FR(1) and (2) June 1924, FR(1) July 1924, FR(1) August 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924.
[8] FR(2) June 1924, FR(1) July 1924, FR(1) August 1924; *H.P.* F. 25/1924.
[9] FR(2) July 1924, *H.P.* F.25/1924; Hailey to Langley, 3 July 1924, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/6A.
[10] For example, meetings were held in the Lahore, Sheikhupura and Rohtak districts. FR(2) July 1924, FR(1) and (2) August 1924, FR(1) September 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924.

By early September, the Congress had reportedly sanctioned a sum of Rs 5,000 for the purpose of the campaign and had also decided to pursue the task of setting up *zamindar sabhas* (peasant associations) in different parts of the province.[11]

Meanwhile, however, Malcolm Hailey had not been idle. He was acutely aware that "there was a great danger that this measure would lead to a widespread agitation among the Punjab agriculturists".[12] Nor had he forgotten the lesson of the 1907 agitation when he was a young Punjab officer.[13] In his opinion, the prospect of agitation in Punjab on the water rates issue was "something infinitely more dangerous than any political or even anarchical movement in Bengal or Madras". Besides, "he was very unwilling that the Sikh situation should be further complicated by an agitation of this nature".[14] And, of course, he believed that the Congress and the peasant must be kept apart at any cost. To quote:[15]

> I think it is of supreme importance to us to keep the Punjab agriculturist from agitation. I am afraid that I constantly repeat myself on this point, but I am convinced that the Congress people can never succeed in being a danger to us unless they enlist the services of a physical force brigade. The Muslims having now failed them owing to decline of interest in Khilafat question, they have been attempting to secure the sympathies, or, at all events, to arouse the feelings of agriculturists in north India. To my mind everything indicates that it is essential that we should manage to keep them apart. Within next two or three years, another big agitation will come, of non-violent type, and I should like to think that when that time came, the Punjab agriculturist was apathetic, if he was not actually hostile to the movement.

It is obvious then that Hailey was more than keen to avert an agitation. Accordingly, he began to explore the possibilities of withdrawing at least a part of the increase in order to stem the protest. He simultaneously started the process of negotiations with members of the Rural or Unionist Party in the Council via Fazl-i-Husain who was a minister in the government. His object was to prevent this party from joining hands with the Swarajists and the Akali members in the Council and also from participating in and supporting the agitation outside the Council. He persuaded the Government of India to readjust the repayment of some heavy overdrafts and thus

[11] FR(1) September 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924; and Hailey to Sir William Vincent, 30 September 1924, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/6(b).
[12] Hailey to Sir Campbell Rhodes, 16 November 1924, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/6(c).
[13] *Ibid*.
[14] *Ibid*.
[15] Hailey to Hirtzel, 13 November 1924, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/6(c).

juggled the provincial accounts to make it possible to knock Rs 2.5 million off the anticipated increase of Rs 7.5 million.[16]

With this concession, he succeeded in winning over the Unionists, who in any case were "not prepared to join the Swarajists ... in a general attack on Government for they foresaw that if there were a general agitation the Swarajists would take matters out of their hands".[17] The Unionists, therefore, confined their protest to voting in favour of a resolution in the Council in November 1924 condemning the increase.[18] On their own, they were even willing to forgo this token protest, provided no other member pressed for it, but since the non-Unionist members were insistent, they did not want to be singled out as having supported a measure which was obviously unpopular with their electorate.[19] Thus, though they voted with the others, "the tone of the debate was moderate", and they "supported the Government in practically all its demands for supplementary grants as well as two taxation bills which will affect the urban classes".[20]

The concession succeeded in taking the sting out of the popular agitation. The Congress water tax sub-committee continued its efforts to sustain the protest.[21] Meetings demanding cancellation of the enhancement continued to be held till April 1925, mainly in the Lahore, Amritsar and Sheikhupura districts,[22] and efforts were even made to set up a provincial organization of peasants.[23] But neither of the two objectives, that of sustaining agitation on the water rates issue and of furthering the process of setting up peasant organizations in the villages and at the provincial level, appears to have met with much success. The only reference to a peasant organization we find is to the Lahore Zamindar Sabha,[24] and the effort to set up a province

[16] For details of the negotiations and manoeuvres, see Langley to Hailey, 2 July 1924; Hailey to Langley, 3 July 1924; Hailey to Sir G. de Montmorency, 10 August 1924; Joint Secretary, Ministry of Education to Hailey, 16 August 1924; Hailey to Sir William Vincent, 30 September 1924; Hailey to Hirtzel, 13 November 1924; Hailey to Sir Campbell Rhodes, 16 November 1924, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/6A, 6 (b) and 6 (c).

[17] Hailey to Sir G. de Montmorency, 10 August 1924, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/6(b).

[18] FR(2) November 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924.

[19] Earlier, in August 1924, when the resolution was first slated to come up for discussion in the Council, the Unionists even declined a government offer to give an extra day for the discussion (since it had not come up in the scheduled time), saying that they hoped a settlement would come about, and refused to support the Sikh members who pressed for an extra day. FR(1) August 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924; Hailey to Sir G. de Montmorency, 10 August 1924, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/6(b).

[20] FR(2) November 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924.

[21] FR(1) November 1924, *H.P.* F. 25/1924.

[22] *The Tribune*, 3, 25 and 27 January 1925, 12 and 17 April 1925; FR(2) January 1925, FR(1) and (2) February 1925, FR(1) and (2) March 1925, FR(1) April 1925, *H.P.* F. 112/1925.

[23] *The Tribune*, 3, 25 and 27 January 1925, 12 and 17 April 1925; FR(2) January 1925, FR(1) February 1925, FR(1) April 1925, *H.P.* F. 112/1925.

[24] *The Tribune*, 3 January 1925.

level organization appears to have ended rather than taken off with the Punjab Provincial Zamindars Conference held in Lahore on 11 April 1925 with the express object of setting up a provincial organization.[25] Similarly, audiences at protest meetings were reported to be dwindling and appeals for refusal of water for a year or for funds to run the agitation evoked little response.[26]

While Hailey's manoeuvres with the Unionists as well as his concession of withdrawing roughly one-third of the proposed increase were undoubtedly critical in stemming the tide of protest, other factors also contributed. The political group with the greatest hold on the politicized sections of the peasantry, that of the Akalis, was at this time still deeply involved in sorting out the tangled threads of the last phase of the Akali Movement, including negotiations with the government, dissension within its ranks, meeting the onslaught of repression and conciliation let loose by Hailey and the like.[27] This was therefore the least opportune moment for them to engage with a new issue. Similarly, the Sikh peasants of central Punjab had as yet barely had time to recoup their energies after the intense struggle, involving considerable sacrifices, they had been involved in: the last major struggle of the Akali Movement, the Jaito Morcha in Nabha, reached its peak only in February 1924 and continued for some time even after that.[28] Thus, for the Sikh peasants as well, this was not the best time to engage in a new round of confrontation with the government. And since the Congress efforts at mobilization of protest were also concentrated among the predominantly Sikh strongholds of central Punjab, where it had a political base, these reasons would explain its relative lack of success as well. The Congress did make some efforts in southeast Punjab, where it had some influence, but with Chhotu Ram and his Zamindar League, whose influence in the region was undoubtedly greater, remaining quiet,[29] it had little chance of success. Besides, as we shall see a little later, the Congress base in the rural areas of southeast Punjab was more among the tenants and the agricultural labourers who were not directly affected by the issue of water rates. In western Punjab, the Unionist Party held almost complete sway in the rural areas and its big landlord members were the least likely candidates for leading a vigorous movement of popular protest. Nor was the situation made desperate by any sharp fall in prices or failure of crops; in fact, the year 1924–25 was a moderately good year as far as prices and crop

[25] FR(1) April 1925, *H.P.* F. 112/1925; *The Tribune*, 12 and 17 April 1925. No references for any later dates were found.

[26] FR(2) January 1925, FR(1) and (2) February 1925, FR(1) March 1925, FR(1) April 1925, *H.P.* F. 112/1925.

[27] See, for example, Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, p. 133.

[28] For the last phase of the Akali Movement and the Jaito Morcha, see *ibid.*, pp. 62–81, 133–36.

[29] Chhotu Ram's Zamindar League was founded in 1924, but there is no reference to its participation in this agitation.

output was concerned. All told, it appears that once the concession was announced, the peasants preferred to accept the rest of the enhancement rather than struggle actively for its cancellation.

Extending Organization and Formulating Demands: 1927–29

The momentum generated by the agitation against the water rates enhancement for the organization and mobilization of the peasantry withered away with the fizzling out of the agitation by mid-1925 and there was no evidence of a new urge till late 1927. This is not surprising, given the situation prevailing among different political groups and parties in the province.[30] The Congress, as noted earlier, was at this time torn apart by the controversy over the communal bias of Lala Lajpat Rai and other prominent leaders and its influence, which was at a very low pitch, began to revive only from early 1928 when the Simon Commission boycott came to occupy centre stage.[31] The Akalis, too, were preoccupied in this period with the gurdwara legislation and its fall-out in terms of the emergence of new groupings and their mutual struggle for control of the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC).[32] The left trend was yet to consolidate itself; the earlier groups had fizzled out and the new coalescence around the *Kirti*, begun only in early 1926, took a while to manifest itself in concrete political activity.[33] Similarly, the NJBS, founded for the first time in early 1926, had in its first phase till mid-1927 functioned only in the urban areas and after that had virtually ceased all activity till it was revived in 1928.[34] Nor is there much evidence of activity on the part of the Zamindar League till early 1928.[35] One reason for this could be that Chhotu Ram, its main promoter, was a minister from 1924 till early

[30] For an overall assessment of the political situation in Punjab at this time and the position of different political groups, see *H.P.* F. 11/10/1927.

[31] See, for example, FR(2) September 1925, FR(2) October 1925, FR(1) April 1926, FR(2) September 1926, FR(1) December 1926, FR(2) February 1927, FR(1) December 1927, FR(2) January 1928, FR(1) February 1928, in *H.P.* F. 112/1925, F. 112/IV/1926, F. 32/1927, and F. 1/1928. Also see *H.P.* F. 11/10/1927, and Memorandum by H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 23 April 1928, in *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/128.

[32] See Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement*, pp. 133–36, 142–43; and K.L. Tuteja, *Sikh Politics*, pp. 118–23.

[33] See, for example, *H.P.* F. 82/1925 and K.W.; *H.P.* F. 18/XVI/1928; FR(2) November 1926, FR(1) March 1927, FR(2) September 1927, FR(1) October 1927, in *H.P.* F. 112/IV/1926, and F. 32/1927. Also see section on Left Wing Groups and Parties in Chapter 1.

[34] See, for example, FR(2) September 1926, FR(1) April 1928, in *H.P.* F. 112/IV/1926 and F. 1/1928. Also see section on Left Wing Groups and Parties in Chapter 1.

[35] The only evidence is of the holding of annual sessions, and a couple of other meetings, and the emphasis appears to be on congratulating members of the Unionist Party who were assuming office and on discussing issues like indebtedness, and what the government had

1927,[36] and had therefore less predilection for organizing the peasants at this time. Besides, the absence of any immediate issue or grievance also probably contributed; the immediate announcement in December 1926 of remission of Rs 3 million in land revenue and water rates when the cotton crop failed in certain districts removed one possible source of discontent.[37]

The first signs of a revival of activity among peasants began to emerge towards the end of 1927 along with the general revival in political activity triggered off by the announcement of the Simon Commission. The Kirti group, now going by the name of the Peasants' and Workers' Party, had already come to the notice of the government when it held a meeting along with the sixth session of the Central Sikh League at Hoshiarpur on 5 and 6 October 1927[38] at which a resolution in favour of the assessment of land revenue on the same basis as income tax was passed, the official report commenting that it appeared to be "an attempt to discover a grievance capable of conversion into a live issue for the purpose of rural agitation".[39] The comment proved prophetic for, as we shall see, this issue was soon to become the staple of the programme of almost all organizations engaged with agrarian demands. The Hoshiarpur conference is therefore significant in that, to our knowledge, it was the first to publicly raise the demand. The only prior mentions we have found are in Sardar Jogendra Singh's dissenting memorandum to the Taxation Inquiry Committee report in early 1926[40] and Chaudhuri Chhotu Ram's abortive attempt to move a resolution on this issue in the Council in March 1927.[41] The articulation of the demand for a reform in the system of land revenue in this particular form, that land revenue be assessed on the same progressive basis as income tax—that as in income tax, incomes below a certain level be exempt from tax and after that be taxed on a graduated basis—brought out the regressive and

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done to solve the problem, and reform of district boards, panchayats, and redistribution of the tax burden. However, there is not much evidence of popular mobilization. See, for example, *The Tribune*, 6 January and 12 December 1925; 25 February, 16 March and 16 June 1926.

[36] Prem Chowdhry, *Punjab Politics*, pp. 172–74.

[37] FR(1) December 1926, *H.P.* F. 112/IV/1926.

[38] FR(1) October 1927, *H.P.* F. 32/1927. The Central Sikh League was an organization that represented the nationalist elements among the Sikhs. This was its sixth session, and Sardar Kharak Singh was the President. The audience was said to consist of "Jullundur division extremists". *Ibid.* For the Central Sikh League, see also FR(1) March 1926, *H.P.* F. 112/IV/1926.

[39] *Ibid*. The Peasants' and Workers' Party, as explained in Chapter 1, was formally founded only in the following year, in April 1928.

[40] *The Tribune*, 10 March 1928. Interestingly, Sardar Jogendra Singh's recommendation and his alleged advocacy of this proposal in the press got him into trouble with the government later on when he became minister, and he had to officially deny that he had done any such thing since assuming office. See *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/11(b).

[41] *PLCD*, Vol. XA, 17 March 1927.

inequitable nature of the land revenue in a particularly evocative and telling fashion. It could be easily grasped by the target audience and was difficult to refute for the opponents. Little wonder then that it captured the imagination of political activists in no time.

Similarly, as political activity picked up in the first few months of 1928, other demands that were to become almost permanent fixtures of the agitational programme of peasant-based organizations also emerged. The abolition of the *chowkidara* tax, levied under the Punjab Village and Small Town Patrol Act passed in 1918, which the villagers were made to pay for the appointment of village guards or *chowkidars*, was one such demand. Reduction of canal water rates and cancellation of a recent enhancement of land revenue on well-irrigated lands were the other two demands that came up with considerable regularity in the gradually increasing number of meetings and conferences that addressed agrarian issues. The organizations most active in this initial period were the Zamindar League, the Kirti group, the Akalis and the NJBS (after its revival in April 1928).[42]

[42] The following is a representative sample of the kinds of meetings held and the nature of the demands put forward; A number of meetings in several districts by the Punjab Zamindars League passed resolutions in favour of abolition of *chowkidara* tax. *PLCD*, Vol. XI, 9 March 1928. Resolutions in favour of income tax principles being adopted for land revenue assessment, abolition of Village Patrol Act, lowering of water rates, etc. was passed in second session of the Workers' and Peasants' Party in Lyallpur in September 1928. The Punjab Provincial Political Conference, whose session was held simultaneously with that of the Workers' and Peasants' Party, also passed resolutions in favour of land revenue on income tax basis and reduction of water rates. FR(2) September 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928. The District Zamindar Conference at Sheikhupura presided over by Chhotu Ram passed resolutions on land revenue on income tax basis, water-logged areas be replaced by new land, increase in number of instalments in Nili Bar Colony, checking of corruption in government departments. *The Tribune*, 4 July 1929. A Zamindar League meeting in Ludhiana demanded land revenue on income tax basis, abolition of Village Patrol Act, cancellation of enhancement of land revenue on well-irrigated land. A Sikh meeting in Jullundur condemned enhancement of land revenue on well-irrigated lands, demanded abolition of Village Patrol Act, chaukidara tax, and assessment of land revenue on income tax basis. FR(1) July 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928. A meeting of Sikh agitators at a religious gathering in Hoshiarpur District demanded abolition of land revenue, enhancement on well-irrigated lands and remission of land revenue. FR(2) July 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928. The main focus of the "extremists connected with Communist and revolutionary Kirti group of Amritsar" was on payment of land revenue on income tax basis, collection of *chaukidara* tax, non-reduction of canal rates. FR(1) January 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928. A memorial was submitted by about 15,000 zamindars of Ludhiana District to the government relating to assessment on well-irrigated lands, *chaukidara* tax, *thikri pehra* (compulsory patrol duty), principles of assessment of land revenue, water rates and other taxes and general economic condition. *PLCD*, Vol. XII, 29 November 1928. "A feature of most politico-agrarian meetings during the last few months has been the criticism of the land revenue system, demand that it be levied according to income-tax, exemption below Rs. 2000. The moderate zamindar associations are trying to bring this about through steady constitutional pressure, but the extremists are hopeful of an agitation." FR(1) December 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928. Resolution on land revenue reform passed at the Third Session of Workers' and Peasants' Party at Rohtak in March 1929. Also on *begar*, *thikri pehra*, remission of water rates, etc. *The Tribune*, 12 March 1929.

The demand for the reform of the land revenue system received support in the Punjab Legislative Council as well, though different members of the Rural or Unionist Party had obviously different perspectives on the issue. For example, Sikandar Hayat Khan moved a resolution in November 1927 that Rs 5 million per annum be set aside for 10 years out of the remission made by the Government of India on the annual contribution of the province to the central budget, at the end of which time a special fund be created and the interest devoted to relief of land revenue, especially in the *barani* or unirrigated tracts which could not bear a heavy burden. The resolution was defeated by the government with the aid of the urban Hindu members.[43] A few months later, in February 1928, Chhotu Ram moved a most radical resolution that land revenue be assessed on the same basis as income tax, but even he only demanded that this be accepted as a goal to be achieved in the next 40 years. The resolution was supported by every elected member in the house, but Fazl-i-Husain, the revenue member, opposed it on behalf of the government saying that there was no chance of the viceroy and the secretary of state accepting such a proposal.[44] Similarly, in the debate on the Land Revenue Amendment Bill in May 1928, proposals were made recommending the exemption of small holdings and imposition of income tax on big landlords who enjoyed unearned incomes. Sections of the press, too, came out in support of proposals for reform of the system of taxation of agriculture.[45]

Recognizing the significance of the demand for land revenue reform and especially of its potency when expressed through the means of comparison with the income tax system, Hailey wrote:[46]

> . . . the rub comes in the fact that land revenue is a universal tax hitting the poorest as well as the richest, and that whereas the income tax payer escapes if his income is less than 2,000/- a year, there is no such provision for the rural assessee. The answer that land revenue is rent may be good enough historically, but is not very convincing in other ways; indeed, I myself feel that you cannot get over a somewhat unpleasant fact

[43] FR(2) November 1927, *H.P.* F. 32/1927; *The Tribune*, 25 November 1927.

[44] *The Tribune*, 24 February 1928; FR(1) March 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.

[45] *The Tribune*, 10 May 1928 and the *Kirti*, November 1929. The Standing Committee for Land Revenue of the Punjab Legislative Council also discussed the possibility of exemption of small holdings. Opinion was divided, but majority agreed to start the experiment with exemption of local rates. *The Tribune*, 27 June 1928. For a general statement on the support to this demand, see memorandum by H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 23 April 1928, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/12B. Also see Hailey to Viceroy, dated 23 March 1928, *Ibid.*, E220/12(a).

[46] Private Letter from Hailey, Governor of Punjab to E.B. Francis, dated 10 May 1928. *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/12B.

> by a change in nomenclature. As time goes on, therefore, there will be persistent attempts to place land revenue on a new basis, graduated much in the same way as income-tax. All I can say is, that I hope I shall not have to face this problem in my time; for it stands to reason that we could not hope (particularly with a Legislative Council largely rural in composition) to recover from the richer landowner the very large amount we should lose by relieving the small holder of the payment of land revenue.

But the immediate issue that became the focus of a sustained, though brief, agitation was provided by the failure of the wheat harvest in many districts in April–May 1928. The failure was a severe one, with peasants in different areas claiming that the crop was one-fifth or one-eighth of the normal.[47] Meetings demanding remission in land revenue and water rates began to be held by the beginning of May with the lead being taken by what the government called "extremist Congressmen" organized in the NJBS and the Kirti Party.[48] The Zamindar League was also very active and organized a number of meetings in Lyallpur as well as formed a new branch in Sheikhupura to voice the demand for remission. Resolutions were passed and telegrams sent to the governor and to members of the Legislative Council.[49] The radical nationalists of the NJBS, the Kirtis, etc., were also quick to emphasize the similarity with the on-going Bardoli peasant struggle; and threats of following the example of Bardoli by refusing to pay taxes were often voiced at their meetings.[50] Among these groups, the NJBS showed the greatest energy in organization and mobilization of popular support, despite being handicapped by lack of funds (which the Kirtis were reluctant to give to them, as mentioned earlier).[51]

The agitation proved effective and soon the government decided that the best course, as in the case of the water rates agitation in 1924–25, was to announce remissions and take the sting out of the protest. Coming as it did in a general atmosphere of heightened political activity in the country and the province, in a situation where the demand for general reform in the land revenue system of the province was gaining ground, and when the opportunity was being seized by the left-wing groups to consolidate their hold, the impact of the agitation was much greater than its actual intensity

[47] *The Tribune*, 9 and 10 May 1928.
[48] FR(1) May 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.
[49] *The Tribune*, 2, 9, 10 and 17 May and 14 June 1928.
[50] See, for example, the report on an Akali *dewan* at Bilga Village in Jullundur District at which Gopal Singh Quami, a prominent left-wing nationalist, made a speech in which he told the audience how the government had been threatened by the Bardoli agitation. *H.P.* F. 26/I/1928. Also see the letter by Ram Chandra to *The Tribune*, 15 June 1928.
[51] FR(2) May 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.

would indicate. Hailey himself was quick to note the long-term implications and larger significance of the new political mood:[52]

> Political agitation has not lately made such headway as we feared, but I find somewhat disturbing signs in the fact that the agricultural element is now much better organised and more vocal than it used to be.... They (the rural classes) have acquired a class consciousness of their own which must find an outlet. They are easily disturbed and not very wise. This year we had what appeared to be an excellent wheat crop, and over large areas it was spoilt by storms and winds at the end of March and April. It has been difficult to deal with it by the ordinary revenue methods, because the mischief only came to light when the crop came on the threshing floor. In the old days there would have been complaints from districts which would have been dealt with by Deputy Commissioners. Now we find large bands of agriculturists, headed by their representatives in the Legislative Council, sitting at the entrance of the Council itself and urging rural members to oppose Government on every possible question, whatever subject it may relate to, unless the *rabi* instalment is remitted. I fear that the political agitator may awake to the fact that he has a very good field open to him for creating trouble among this class; we know that Russian money is coming in to support agitation in the villages. It may be a certain advantage that your agriculturist is not much concerned with abstract political theories, and is somewhat interested in the concrete facts of life; but we shall find as time goes on that he can be just as troublesome, or even more troublesome, than your urban politician.

Thus, to avert further trouble, the government, in early June 1928, announced remissions of Rs 4 million on land revenue and water rates. The districts of Lyallpur, Gujranwala, Sheikhupura, Jhang and Gujarat were among those given full remissions.[53] The concession was extended to Montgomery after the NJBS began to build up an agitation in that district.[54] The government was satisfied that the remissions were "well-received" and that the agitation on this issue had been stemmed.[55]

The momentum provided by the agitation was, however, sought to be sustained by the political activists in a variety of ways. One excellent opportunity was provided by the Bardoli struggle which at this time was at its peak. All over the country, solidarity was being expressed with the

[52] Private letter from Hailey to E.B. Francis, dated 10 May 1928, *Hailey Papers*, Mss. Eur. E220/12B.

[53] FR(1) June 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928; *The Tribune*, 3 June 1928.

[54] FR(1) July 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.

[55] FR(1) and (2) June 1928, FR(1) and (2) July 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.

peasants of Bardoli by the celebration of Bardoli Day, collection of funds, holding of meetings to spread the message of Bardoli, etc. In Punjab as well, the young nationalists, enthused by this symbol of mass resistance to foreign rule, organized the Bardoli Day celebrations on 12 June, and collected funds, etc. Once the agitation for remissions on account of harvest failure subsided, even more attention was riveted on Bardoli.[56] At meetings in rural areas, the audience was told that the success in the agitation for remission of taxes was due to the sacrifice of the peasants of Bardoli, and also because the peasants of Punjab had threatened to follow the Bardoli example of refusing to pay if remissions were not granted. Those areas where there had been no protest on agrarian issues were told to learn from Bardoli and from the other areas of Punjab which had realized that they could only secure their demands if they asserted themselves. In order to counter the government's argument that it took ameliorative measures on its own initiative out of concern for the people, examples were given of the backward areas of Punjab, such as Kangra, where the condition of the people was utterly miserable, and of the treatment meted out to the backward people like the Junglis of the canal colonies.[57] The message being driven home was that only organization and struggle would yield results.

Further, an attempt was made to sustain popular interest in agitation by reiterating the other continuing and long-standing peasant demands such as the cancellation of the enhancement in land revenue on well-irrigated lands, abolition of the Village Patrol Act and of course the assessment of land revenue on the income tax basis.[58]

While there was not much to differentiate the programme of the Zamindar League, which also continued to be active in this period, from that of the radical nationalists as far as agrarian demands were concerned, the crucial difference was in the nature of the political message that accompanied the economic demands. While in the discourse of the Zamindar League there was no room even for nationalism, leave alone for its left-wing version, the radical nationalists were very particular about the political content of their activity. Their speeches emphasized anti-imperialism, contained references to other struggles, such as those by the Babbar Akalis or the Bardoli peasants and often to the Russian Revolution as well.[59] Further, they

[56] FR(1) and (2) June 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928; Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 25 October 1928, *H.P.* F. 18/XVI/1928.

[57] See, for example, speeches made by Gopal Singh Quami, Sant Ram Pandha, Kedar Nath Sehgal at political meetings in villages in the Jullundur and Hoshiarpur districts, for which they were later prosecuted. *H.P.* F. 26/I/1928 and 26/I/1929. Also see *The Tribune*, 15 June 1928.

[58] See, for example. FR(1) and (2) July 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.

[59] See, for example, FR(1) October 1927, *H.P.* F. 32/1927; FR(1) and (2) July 1928; FR(2) September 1928, FR(1) November 1928, FR(1) December 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928; FR(1) March 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929; *H.P.* F. 26/I/1928 and 26/I/1929; *The Tribune*, 15 June 1928, 5 October 1929.

articulated their political and economic programme not only at meetings organized specifically for the purpose (as was the case with the Zamindar League) but at any platform that was available to them—be it a religious fair in Hoshiarpur district or an Akali *dewan* in a village in Jullundur or a conference of another political group. Pamphlets were brought out, articles written in the *Kirti* weekly as well as in other sympathetic vernacular newspapers and "letters to the editor" columns of major newspapers such as *The Tribune* used to propagate their ideas.[60]

By September, the momentum generated by political activity among the peasants, as well as in general, was sufficient for the left leaders, especially Sohan Singh josh, to organize a session of the Kirti Kisan or Workers' and Peasants' Party along with the Punjab Provincial Political Conference organized by the Congress at Lyallpur.[61] Also, the left activity among peasants had by now caused an apprehension strong enough for the government and loyalist landlords to actively carry on counter-propaganda to dissuade the peasants of the surrounding areas from attending the conference.[62] The resolutions demanding assessment of land revenue on income tax basis and reduction of water rates were passed both at the political conference and the Peasants' and Workers' Conference while the latter went on to demand abolition of the Village Patrol Act, etc.[63] The government report on the proceedings remarked that "Communist doctrines were preached with greater candour than on any previous occasion".[64]

Nevertheless, the government was not yet too worried about the "Communist menace" in the province as a whole, or about the left's attempts at mobilization of the peasantry. In a long and exhaustive note on the subject that H.W. Emerson, the Chief Secretary, wrote in October 1928 in response to the Government of India's queries in connection with the Public Safety Bill,[65] the basic position of the Punjab Government was that "there is no immediate cause for anxiety in this Province". The reasons for this were, one, that "there are no big scale industries and with the exception of the North-Western Railway, there is no industrial body which offers to the

[60] See, for example, letter by H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 25 October 1928, *H.P.* F. 18/XVI/1928; *H.P.* F. 26/I/1928 and 26/I/1929; *The Tribune*, 15 June 1928; FR(1) October 1927, *H.P.* F. 32/1927, FR (2) July 1928, FR(1) September 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928; FR(1) March 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[61] FR(2) September 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928; *The Tribune*, 13 September 1928; Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 25 October 1928, *H.P.* F. 18/XVI/1928.

[62] *The Tribune*, 27 September 1928; FR(2) September 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.

[63] FR(2) September 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.

[64] Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 25 October 1928, *H.P.* F. 18/XVI/1928.

[65] *Ibid*. All references in this and the next three paragraphs are from this note.

Communist any considerable scope for fomenting discontent and strikes among industrial labour". Second, the pattern of land ownership did not provide much scope either, since land was owned by "not only the few large landed proprietors and the multitude of small peasant owners, but also an increasing number of medium size owners, who have acquired by grant or purchase, squares in the canal colonies". On the assumption that Communist theory was opposed to private property and that Communist mobilization among the peasantry would reflect this understanding, he went on to argue that "the theory of the nationalization of land is thus entirely opposed to the instincts and to the interests of a section of the rural population which is numerically large and politically powerful".

Further, since it was expected that Communists would, given their theory, naturally take up the anti-landlord demands of tenants and agricultural labourers, it was argued that the scope was limited in this direction: "the relations between the landlord and the tenant are ordinarily good. The predominant system of rent is by division of the produce and this system creates an identity of interests which operates to reduce friction and ill-feeling. The Communist agitator cannot, therefore, attack the interests of the landlord without adversely affecting those of the tenant, and he cannot attempt to seduce the hired agricultural labourer without raising the opposition both of the owner and tenant bodies". Moreover, it was expected that "in his belittlement of religion as a political and moral force, the Communist cannot fail to fall foul in the Punjab of both the Muhammadan and the Sikh communities, among whom religion is not only a vital part of their social life, but the determining factor in their political aims and ambitions".

The chief secretary, however, made it clear that this optimistic assessment was valid only "in as much as the activities of the communist in the Punjab follow the lines of the Communist International", in which case "opposition will develop as his doctrines and plans become more widely known". However, with a foresight that reflected the deep understanding of the potential of an alliance between communism and nationalism, he pointed out that "the proximate danger lies in a direction other than communistic, namely, in the association of the 'Kirti' and the 'Naujawan Bharat' group with anti-Government movements.... It has also to be borne in mind that at times of acute excitement, during which racial feeling runs high, the various groups of political extremists are apt to sink their differences and to combine against Government; and in this connection the emergence of a new party of political workers, whose aims are revolutionary and whose theories are calculated to appeal to the lowest strata of society, represents a danger, the potentialities of which it would be a folly to underestimate".

The report also pointed out that this is what the Communist movement, "so far... represented in the Punjab mainly by the 'Kirti' party and the 'Naujawan Bharat Sabha'—two bodies which work in close association", has

been doing. "The policy of the Communist leaders is to associate themselves actively with any agitation that gives promise of embarassing Government. Thus they have attempted to take a prominent part in the demonstrations against the Simon Commission, in the agitation for the remission of land revenue, and in the organisation of support for the peasants of Bardoli".

Two months later, in December, the official report noted that "Lahore extremists" were "trying to capture the zamindar associations" and exploit rural grievances for political purposes.[66] (The reference was probably to the loyalist organizations which the government had earlier in the year unofficially tried to sponsor through the district boards by asking the zamindar members of the boards to meet separately and form themselves into "zamindar associations" which could then present the "rural" point of view [as opposed to the nationalist "urban" point of view] before the Simon Commission.[67] They were also taking up local issues such as the demand of peasant grantees in Shahpur that they be relieved of the onerous conditions on which land was granted to them for horse-breeding and the discontent in Lahore over the remodelling of a canal distributary, in addition to the reiteration of the general demand for the reform of the land revenue system to bring it in line with that of income tax.[68] The new Governor, Geoffrey de Montmorency, writing around this time to the ex-Viceroy, Lord Reading, about the troubles he had just stepped into, commented: "Troublesome also is a growing campaign to rope in the peasant proprietors of the Province into a combination against land revenue and a refusal to pay taxes. This is fostered by the Communist group and seems to get some financial help from sources outside India and certainly at the moment from extreme Congress politicians. It is politically very dangerous and not easy to stop as it is fostered to a large extent by comparatively harmless lectures on rural economics".[69]

It is indeed significant that while at the same time the Zamindar League under Chhotu Ram's leadership was also quite active in taking up issues similar to those tackled by the left groups, and was in some ways far more advanced in the actual setting up of its branches in the various districts,[70] there is never any note of worry in the official reports on its activities. And

[66] FR(1) December 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.
[67] See *The Tribune*, 17 July 1928.
[68] FR(1) December 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928.
[69] Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency to Lord Reading, undated (but just after Lajpat Rai's death, that is, in November 1928), *Reading (Pvt.) Collection*, Mss. Eur. F. 118/58, India Office Library and Records, London.
[70] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 6 January and 12 December 1925; 25 February, 16 March and 16 June 1926; 24 February, 10 May, 12 May, 17 May, 30 October, 6 December, 29 December, 1928; 4 July, 7 December 1929; FR (1) July 1928, *H.P.* F. 1/1928; *PLCD*, Vol. XI, 9 March 1928, Vol. XII, 29 November 1928, etc.

for good reason: its meetings and conferences were attended and addressed by the big landlord members of the Council such as Sikandar Hayat Khan;[71] and the government was right in assuming that despite its avowal of radical changes in the land revenue system, etc., there was never any danger that its mobilization on these issues would become the prelude to a more generalized anti-British popular mobilization, as was the case with left-wing nationalist mobilization.[72]

Meantime, however, political attention began to rivet on other developments: the fresh wave of anti-Simon Commission protest at the end of October, the brutal repression and Lala Lajpat Rai's death. The avenging of his death by members of the NJBS marked a new stage in the left movement in the province, for it soon led to a spate of arrests of those suspected of involvement, thus forcing others to also lie low. This also inevitably meant that all attention would now focus on the more directly political issues affecting the organization, rather than on the task of peasant mobilization.[73] The Kirtis were able to function freely for some time longer. They organized the third session of their party in early March 1929 in Rohtak along with the fifteenth session of the Provincial Political Conference organized by the Congress, at which resolutions urging land revenue on income tax basis and refusal to pay taxes if demands were not met were passed.[74] But repression soon hit the Kirtis as well; and later in the month Sohan Singh Josh, Kedar Nath Sehgal and M.A. Majid were arrested along with other major Indian Communists to stand trial in the famous Meerut conspiracy

[71] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 12 December 1925, 16 March 1926, 24 February, 17 May, 30 October 1928, etc.

[72] For example, Fazl-i-Husain, who remained the unquestioned leader of the Unionist Party even after he joined the reserved half of the government as revenue member (and even after he left for Delhi in 1930 to join the Government of India), had consistently put his weight against any radical proposals for reform of the land revenue system, etc., that came from members of his party and in favour of the government. A very good example is the speech he gave to his party members when they were bidding him farewell on his appointment as Member of the Viceroy's Executive Council in 1930. After telling them not to argue for tax reform, such as assessment of land revenue on income tax basis, etc., he went on to list all that the government had done for the agriculturists in the last four years. He then explained that this policy was in the interests of the Unionist Party, for he obviously saw no contradiction between the two. The gains of this policy consisted in "establishing in the minds of the zamindars, tax payers, the countryside that government is ready to administer the laws justly and fairly. The government has enabled them (the Unionists) to assure the countryside that the best interests of the countryside are nearest to the heart of the administrators". This speech was later published by the Unionist Party as "Our Political Programme". The nexus between government and Unionists could not have been better stated. *Fazl-i-Husain Papers*, Mss. Eur. E352, India Office Library and Records, London.

[73] See, for example, FR(1) January 1929, FR(2) February 1929, FR(2) March 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[74] FR(1) March 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

case.[75] After this, while both the NJBS and the Kirtis continued to make sporadic attempts for the rest of the year to maintain their links with the peasants and even succeeded in a few cases in organizing meetings and the like, the scale of their activity was nowhere compared to that in the previous year.[76] Bhagat Singh and Dutt's arrest in the Assembly bomb case and then the initiation of the process of their prosecution in the Lahore conspiracy case greatly boosted the popularity of the NJBS, as did Jatin Das's death after a prolonged hunger strike in jail, but it also ensured that its members' attention was occupied with the organization of the defence, collection of funds, celebration of Bhagat Singh-Dutt days, holding of meetings in Jatin Das's honour and the like—all very important in themselves—and there was little time for continuing with the process of politicization and organization of the peasantry which they had initiated with such enthusiasm.[77]

The Kirtis, on the other hand, were disoriented not only by the Meerut arrests but also by the new Comintern line given by Stalin that it was wrong for Communists to ally with the bourgeoisies in colonial countries—a line which ruled out alliance with or working within the Congress, which the Indian Communists via the Workers' and Peasants' Parties had been doing with remarkable results till then. The new line was initially resisted in India and it took time for the local units to fall in line, thus leading to a considerable period of ambiguity through 1929.[78] But by the end of the year, clearer signs that the new line was being adopted began to appear,[79] though even here the situation in Punjab was complicated by the fact that the Communists with Ghadarite origins had too strong a nationalist orientation to follow this line the whole hog, as we shall see later. The activists of the NJBS were not particularly inclined to anti-Congressism of this variety, and this soon led to their distancing from the Kirti Kisan Party.[80] In other words, by the time the situation was ripening for the next major national struggle, the process of the consolidation of a left nationalist trend, which looked so promising in the year of the anti-Simon Commission Movement, had been considerably checked and this was to have important consequences for peasant politics as well.

[75] FR(1) March 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[76] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 5 October and 20 October 1929, and FR(2) June 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[77] See, for example, FR(1) June 1929, FR(1) and (2) July 1929, FR(1) August 1929, FR(1) and (2) September 1929, FR(1) October 1929, FR(1) November 1929, FR(2) December 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[78] Aditya Mukherjee, "The Workers' and Peasants' Parties, 1926–30: An Aspect of Communism in India", in Bipan Chandra, ed., *The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals*, New Delhi, 1983.

[79] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 28 December 1929; Telegram from Punjab Government to Government of India, dated 27 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 98/1930.

[80] See Chapter 3.

However, before we go on to an assessment of these formative years of the modern peasant movement in Punjab, we have yet to recount a few smaller stories that were difficult to include in the account given so far since they represented quite distinct strands on their own. One is a story of rural labourers, the second of tenants and the third of ex-soldiers.

Gandhians, *Kamins*, and Balmikis

The first story is of the class of people known in the villages as *kamins*, belonging to the lowest castes, who generally worked as agricultural labourers (and sometimes as petty tenants) along with their other hereditary occupations such as scavenging, skinning of dead animals and making earthen pots. The story is important not because it narrates some heroic saga or great struggle, but because of its rarity. Generally speaking, this section of the rural population was the least politically conscious, least organized and least assertive. Its interests found hardly any reflection in the programmes of even the most radical groups and parties, and this was true not only of the years till 1929, which we are dealing with presently, but all the way to Independence and many years after that as well. Therefore, when we find evidence of any effort at voicing their needs, however small, or a glimmering of a spirit of resistance on their part, however faint, the story needs to be told.

The Punjab Achhut Udhhar Mandal, an organization run by two well-known nationalists, Mohan Lal and Achint Ram of the Servants of People Society (founded by Lala Lajpat Rai), took the initiative in mobilizing against the practice of *begar*, or forced labour, which all kinds of revenue, police and other officials would exact from the *kamins* of the villages. Their effort was to make the people aware that they had the legal right to refuse *begar*. There was already a government notification against it, but people were not aware of this and therefore they started an educative propaganda campaign via publication and distribution of thousands of copies in Hindi, Urdu, Gurmukhi and English of the government notifications banning *begar*. A department for receiving complaints and sending them on to government and publicizing them in the press was set up and another one to carry on an extensive lecture campaign throughout the province.[81] That these efforts met with some success is indicated by Fazl-i-Husain's acknowledgement in the Legislative Council, in response to a question, that complaints regarding forced labour had been received against *tehsildars, thanedars, zaildars, sufaidposhes* and *lambardars* and that the commissioners had been

[81] Letter to the Editor by Mohan Lal, Secretary, Punjab Achhut Uddhar Mandal, *The Tribune*, 31 May 1927.

asked to enquire into these,[82] as well by some evidence that local level mobilization on this issue was taking place.[83]

Apart from *begar*, the other major issue on which attention was focused was a decision of the government to classify the *kamins* as "non-agriculturists" under the terms of the Land Alienation Act, thus depriving them of the right to become owners of land. Protests against the injustice of this classification—which legally disabled 3 million *kamins* who mainly performed agricultural labour as farm servants, field labourers and tenants—were voiced by the Punjab Achhut Udhhar Mandal at the Punjab Provincial Political Conference in Amritsar in April 1928.[84] The next year a Punjab Landless Agricultural Workers League was set up by a representative conference of the depressed classes with Mohan Lal as the secretary and this body too demanded the cancellation of this invidious classification. It was pointed out at the conference that the government's decision had expropriated them even from their dwelling sites and a demand was made that they be at least declared de facto owners of the dwelling sites and of the houses in which they lived if they had occupied them for more than 12 years.[85]

Glimmerings of a spirit of resistance on the part of the *kamins* were also reflected in the dispute that occurred between landowners and *kamins* in 1927 in village Baghiana in Lahore District. The initial spark was provided by the refusal of the *kamins*, who belonged to the Balmiki sect, to continue to perform the traditional task of the flaying of dead animals. Apparently, this was a consequence of their being influenced by the Depressed Classes Uplift Movement. The landowning community of the village retaliated by trying to force the Balmikis into accepting a collective contract for performing the task, and at rates lower than the ones they had been getting under the earlier system of contracts with individual landowners. Mohan Lal of the Achhut Uddhar Mandal offered to intervene and asked for time to consider the proposal, but the landowners refused and insisted on an immediate reply which the Balmikis refused to give. On this, the landowners resorted to a complete boycott of the Balmikis, forcing shopkeepers to refuse them goods, preventing them from using the village tank, thoroughfares and *shamlat* or common lands and even from going to the police station to report the developments. Following this, a minor incident led to an attack by the landowners on the Balmikis and many of the latter were seriously injured.[86] It appears that the assertion by the *kamins* of their right to refuse

[82] *The Tribune*, 25 November 1927.

[83] *The Tribune*, 9 September 1927, reports a meeting of the Punjab Achhut Uddhar Mandal on the issue of *begar* held at Zafferke in Lahore District which Balmiki representatives of 30 villages attended.

[84] *The Tribune*, 11 April 1928.

[85] *The Tribune*, 7 September 1929.

[86] *The Tribune*, 7 July 1927.

to continue to perform a traditional service was seen as a threat serious enough for the landowners to combine to put down the resistance with a heavy hand, a course of action they would not need to resort to if the *kamins* were quietly accepting their traditional roles.

Gandhian Movement on Skinner's Estate: 1929

The second story is that of the tenants of Skinner's Estate, comprising 15 villages in the Hansi Tehsil of Hissar District. This was an area in which the Congress had some influence in the rural belt, due to the dedicated efforts of grass-roots level Gandhians like Pandit Neki Ram Sharma. The Skinner family had owned these 15 villages for over 100 years and the land was cultivated by tenants-at-will. The grievances related to *begar*, illegal ejectments and high rates of rent. In January 1929, largely through the efforts of Pandit Neki Ram Sharma, the tenants organized themselves into a Kisan Sabha.[87] A panchayat of all the 15 villages was held, the grievances discussed and a vow taken to remain non-violent even in the face of repression. Pandit Neki Ram Sharma, who addressed the panchayat, also explained to them that their quarrel was not with the members of the Skinner family or their employees personally, but with the unfair treatment and therefore they were not to cause personal harm to anyone. The panchayat resolved to first refuse *begar*, that is, there would be no labour without remuneration and nothing would be sold without securing the market price. Other grievances were to be taken up soon.[88]

The Kisan Sabha now gave notice to the owners to have their grievances redressed and simultaneously stepped up the work of popular mobilization. Pandit Neki Ram Sharma toured from village to village along with his comrades. Mobilization was carried on in neighbouring villages as well and also in the area around Hissar. A big show of strength in the form of a conference was planned for 24 February 1929 at Garhi Village.[89] The conference was reported to be a success, with more than 15,000 attending, including representatives from 125 villages. People had also come from Meerut, Delhi, Rohtak and Bhiwani. Among the leaders who extended support by attending it were Pandit Thakurdas Bhargava, MLA, Chaudhri Mukhtiar Singh, MLA, Lala Deshbandhu and Shri Shamlal. The conference expressed dismay at the lack of response on the part of the proprietors of the estate and passed a resolution asking the tenants to, while remaining non-violent, withhold rent.[90]

[87] *The Tribune*, 16 January and 1 March 1929. This was probably the first time that the name "Kisan Sabha" was used in Punjab.

[88] *The Tribune*, 16 January 1929.

[89] *The Tribune*, 25 January 1929.

[90] *The Tribune*, 28 February 1929.

Following this, a special meeting of the Kisan Sabha was held at Alakhpura on 27 February to discuss the proposal for non-payment of rent made in the conference at Garhi. The decision taken was to not cooperate with the owners and their servants; and in pursuance of this decision a lambardar was totally boycotted by all 15 villages.[91] A deputation of the tenants also met the governor but nothing seems to have come out of it. By May, when rents became due, the resolve of the tenants had hardened and on 5 May a decision was taken to refuse payment of rent. The tenants considered all the possibilities that this would entail including ejectments and prosecutions and decided to still go ahead with non-payment of rent.[92]

The pressure of non-payment of rent was sufficient to force one of the two proprietors, Stanley Skinner, to enter into an agreement in July accepting all the demands of the tenants of his eight villages. *Begar* was abolished, *nazrana* and illegal ejectments stopped and rents reduced. The employees of the estate who had been responsible for oppression were to be transferred. The agreement was announced in the presence of the Deputy Commissioner, Abdul Aziz.[93]

In accordance with the agreement, the tenants, while continuing the struggle against the other proprietor, Robert Skinner, paid up the rents at the lower rates due to Stanley Skinner, despite the existence of severe difficulties due to drought. Having secured the rents, Stanley Skinner now did a turnabout and refused to implement his part of the agreement. Employees were not transferred and fresh ejectment proceedings were begun. By October, the situation came to a head with the other proprietor also intensifying the repression by launching prosecutions against the tenants and even getting some of them arrested. Rumours of the impending arrest of Lajpat Rai, the secretary of the Kisan Sabha, also became common.[94] Tension was high and rose further when a peasant, Harsukh, was sentenced to a month's imprisonment in early November. Many others were also being implicated in criminal proceedings.[95]

The proprietors had clearly hoped to cow down the tenants with threats of arrest, etc., but this attempt only served to strengthen their resistance. Bodies of volunteers were seen parading in Hansi Bazar and preparations for a huge conference on 10 November were set in motion.[96] Garhi was again the venue, but this time the occasion was graced with the presence of a national leader of the stature of Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya. Messages of support came from Gandhiji himself, as well as from Sardar Patel,

[91] *The Tribune*, 5 March 1929.
[92] *The Tribune*, 8 and 15 May 1929.
[93] *The Tribune*, 2 August 1929.
[94] *The Tribune*, 10, 16 and 26 October 1929.
[95] *The Tribune*, 7 November 1929.
[96] *The Tribune*, 7 and 10 November 1929.

Jawaharlal Nehru and others. The conference decided that civil disobedience in the form of non-payment of taxes and rents would be offered by the residents of all 15 villages and a band of volunteers was to be organized.[97] The timing of this decision, November 1929, ensured that the tenants' struggle in Hansi Tehsil would now become part of the nation-wide Civil Disobedience Movement to be launched shortly.

The significance of the tenants' struggle on Skinner's Estate is that it is the only example we have of such a movement in this early period. It is also important to note that both in the case of the tenants, as well as in that of the *kamins*, the lead is taken by those nationalist workers or leaders who had been deeply impressed by Gandhiji's emphasis on working among the masses, and especially the untouchables. In a period when no one else had come round to taking up the cause of these sections, the Gandhian nationalists, in their own way, initiated and kept up the resistance.[98] It is also important that Neki Ram Sharma did not just organize the tenants under the Congress banner but formed a Kisan Sabha, thus recognizing the necessity of forming class organizations to express the sectional interests of various classes or strata.

From Loyalty to Sedition: Anup Singh's Fauj

The third and last story in this series is of ex-soldiers, but it is very much a part of the larger story of peasants and their struggles that we are narrating, because these were not only ex-soldiers who hailed from peasant families, but were themselves now actively engaged in agriculture after serving their stint in the army. The story is important for many reasons, but perhaps the most significant of these is that it shows how the new spirit of assertion of one's demands through mass mobilization—rather than through appeals and petitions—was manifesting itself even in quarters considered the most loyal to the British.

Ex-risaldar Anup Singh, a resident of Palmerabad Village in the district of Lahore, described in government documents as a "megalomaniac" and "a heavy drinker and opium-eater",[99] is the hero of this story. He may well have been all that the documents call him, but along with that he also emerges as a tremendous organizer and mobilizer, a man who succeeded in becoming a first-class headache for the Government of the Punjab. Anup Singh had served in the Central India Horse but was made to take his

[97] *The Tribune*, 10 and 13 November 1929.
[98] Pandit Neki Ram Sharma had taken up the issue of *begar* among Harijans since 1921. So had Shri Ram Sharma. Interview with Shri Ram Sharma. Also see *The Tribune*, 19 May 1925.
[99] Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.D. Haig, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 27 November 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

discharge in 1914 for fomenting an agitation in the regiment. Later, he worked in the police as a sub-inspector for a few months. In 1922, he became the president of the Soldiers' Association, which was described as "a body which ... means nothing more than some hundreds of ex-soldiers collected occasionally for a definite purpose under his leadership".[100] This probably meant that the Association did not have a formal constitution, office-bearers, regular meetings, etc., but served as the banner under which the subsequent agitation was organized.

The first time the activities of Anup Singh came into prominence was in early 1926 when he organized a *dewan* in Amritsar.[101] In November of the same year he took a *jatha* of 100 military pensioners to Montgomery District with the declared intention of seizing the land of some big landlord grantees in protest against the government's failure to recognize the services of ex-soldiers with adequate rewards, especially by way of grants of land. They marched to the estate of Sir Ganga Ram, the noted Punjab industrialist and philanthropist, but were met by the DC, the DIG and the SP who persuaded the *jatha* to return to their homes and submit petitions stating their grievances. At that time the incident was dismissed as of no consequence, especially since the *jatha* had remained non-violent and not actually tried to seize land.[102]

Nothing more was heard of Anup Singh till March 1928, when he recommenced his activities in village Pander in Hoshiarpur District. For the rest of the year he was busy organizing meetings in the districts of Lahore, Hoshiarpur, Lyallpur, Gurdaspur, Ferozepore and Jullundur. The main brunt of the message he delivered in these was that military pensioners and discharged soldiers should press their demands at all costs.[103] At the time, however, no particular note was taken of these activities.[104]

The government woke up only in December 1928 when Anup Singh arrived in Lahore with a *jatha* of 500–600 ex-soldiers. "All sorts of old soldiers turned up, some very old, others maimed by wounds, others the ordinary discharged men out of work and a considerable number of Mazhabis. There were a few Indian officers".[105] They had come in response to a proclamation

[100] Letter from F.H. Puckle, Deputy Commissioner, Lahore to F.W. Kennaway, Commissioner, Lahore Division, dated 7 December 1928, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

[101] Report by F.W. Kelly, Col., Deputy Director, Military Intelligence, dated 11 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930.

[102] *Ibid*. and FR(1) November 1926, *H.P.* F. 112/1926.

[103] Report by E.W. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930.

[104] For example, the Fortnightly Reports of this period contain no reference to his activities. Nor have we found any memorandum or note or letter by any government official in the files relating to this period.

[105] Letter from F.H. Puckle, DC, Lahore, dated 7 December 1928, *H.P.* F. 138/1930. "Mazhabis" is the term used to describe low-caste Sikhs to distinguish them from high-caste Sikhs such as Jats and Khatris.

that Anup Singh had issued and circulated widely throughout central Punjab, calling upon all ex-soldiers who had grievances to come to Lahore on 3 December:[106]

> All friends should gather at the Railway station of Lahore City by 12 noon. At 3 O'clock in the afternoon a grand military procession with band will start and pass through the streets of Lahore. In the evening after the Diwan is held the Govt. and the world will be told what our state is.... In the morning after approaching His Excellency with our request the force will start towards Rakh Baikuntha where the agitation is to take place. Every soldier should wear his medals on his chest....

The *jatha*, however, was not very well-organized and was unable to agree on the composition of the deputation of five members that the governor agreed to receive. Nor were they able to draft a joint petition and finally dispersed on 7 December after agreeing to forward a petition signed by Anup Singh, with the proviso that they would all return on 7 January 1929 to receive the governor's reply.[107]

Having succeeded in persuading the *jatha* to leave, the government machinery now swung into motion to prevent their return in January. Anup Singh's petition had made it clear that what the ex-soldiers wanted was "land and nothing else will they take as a satisfactory substitute for it". The government's view was that if they could determine the exact grievances of those who had come in the *jatha*, through enquiries by deputy commissioners and with the assistance of the District Soldiers' Boards, and if something could be done for the really deserving cases, it may prevent their return.[108] By early January, it became clear that at least some would return, and the commissioner of Lahore Division called in a number of prominent Indian officers and sardars from the districts in his division. On 5 and 6 January, these men "did their best by meeting trains and by visiting the motor lorries stands to turn back the ex-soldiers". Their success was clearly marginal and by the evening of 7 January at least 1,500 people had collected in Lahore at Gurdwara Dera Sahib. The efforts of the government-inspired Indian officers to persuade them to leave proving futile, the deputy commissioner went to the *jatha* and handed them a warning notice. This too had no effect and Anup Singh declared that the next day they would all march to Government House, the *jatha* shouting "that they would accompany him even at the cost of their lives".[109]

[106] *Ibid*.
[107] *Ibid*., and Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930.
[108] Letter from F.H. Puckle, DC, Lahore, dated 7 December 1928, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.
[109] Letter from F.H. Puckle, DC, Lahore, to F.W. Kennaway, Commissioner, Lahore Division, dated 29 January 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

The next day, Anup Singh and his lieutenant Sampuran Singh were arrested before they could march to Government House, but members of the *jatha*, among whom there were many women, on hearing of this, started to march to the *kutchery* where the two leaders were held. They were intercepted on the way, warned, asked to disperse. They stopped but refused to disperse and sat down on the side of the road in an orderly manner. They stayed without food or blankets in the cold January night till the next day when the local gurdwara committee received permission to provide food and fetch their beddings from the godown where they had been stored. They remained thus, on the roadside, till 19 January—a full 12 days. The government roped in many local Sikh notables to put pressure—but to no avail. Notices were served again on 14 January, but these were publicly burnt on the encouragement of Anup Singh's wife. Further notices on 17 January had no effect either.[110]

It was only when Anup Singh was released on bail after furnishing a security of Rs 30,000 on 18 January and Sampuran Singh on a security of Rs 3,000 on 19 January, and they had returned to the *jatha*, that strong unofficial pressure succeeded in persuading them to move from the roadside to the Dera Sahib.[111]

Obviously impressed with the determination of the *jatha,* which it had failed to disperse by threat or pressure, the government decided that the only way to defuse the situation and get the ex-soldiers out of Lahore was to allow a deputation to meet the governor. Accordingly, an 18-member deputation met the Governor, de Montmorency, on 21 January. He assured them that individual cases of hardship would be dealt with by the district authorities and asked them not to alienate the sympathies of government by foolish acts since the government had already done a lot for them. Individual petitions would be accepted and investigated. The ex-soldiers wrote out their individual petitions—1950 of them, which shows that the numbers assembled in Lahore were at least that much—which Anup Singh handed over to the deputy commissioner and returned home by 22 January.[112]

Having averted the immediate crisis, the government appears to have again taken a rather sanguine attitude. A very large number of additional petitions, from those who had not joined the *jatha*, were also received—2,000 from Ambala District alone—as word went round that petitions were being considered.[113] At the end of the cold weather, a meeting of the

[110] *Ibid*. and *The Tribune*, 10 and 18 January 1929.

[111] Letter from F.H. Puckle, DC, Lahore, dated 29 January 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

[112] *Ibid*.; Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930; and *The Tribune*, 23 January 1929. An editorial in *The Tribune*, dated 24 January, made the point that the soldiers' real grievance was that government grants were not fair, those having access to officials manage to get favours and the rewards are not for real services rendered.

[113] Letter from C.M.G. Oglivie, Officiating Home Secretary, Punjab to the Secretary to the Government of India, Army Department, dated 14 June 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

Provincial Soldiers' Board was held, presided over by the governor and attended by the general officer commanding-in-chief, Northern Command, which considered the problems of ex-soldiers. At the district level, enquiries were made by the deputy commissioner with the assistance of the District Soldiers' Boards.[114] The enquiries found that "there is a certain amount of genuine distress among ex-servicemen whose pensions are small or who have not been found eligible for pension and have little or no land of their own... (and among) soldiers who have been disabled by wounds and whose pensions are insufficient...."[115] But in terms of concrete action, of the 1950 petitions submitted by the *jatha* in January, only 354 had been examined by June, of which 73 had been declared deserving of some relief or monetary grant and 11 eligible for grant of land.[116]

However, what probably dashed all the hopes of the ex-soldiers, and provoked another round of confrontation, was the letter issued on 11 July 1929 by the home secretary, Punjab, and circulated to all commissioners and deputy commissioners in the province with the request that it be placed before the District Soldiers' Boards so that they may make the situation clear to all the ex-servicemen in their area. This letter stated that government has thought it necessary to "make it clear that there is no more land available for grants to ex-servicemen and no applications for grants of this nature can be received or entertained".[117] It is hardly fortuitous that "the temporary lull" reported in Anup Singh's activities since January also ended in July when this letter was made public and he resumed his campaign through meetings and correspondence.[118]

This time, however, there was a different tone to the campaign. Whereas earlier there were no references in government reports to any political connections of Anup Singh or his followers, or any real worry about the basic loyalty of the ex-soldiers,[119] there was, from July 1929 onwards, an awareness that the mood of the ex-soldiers had changed and that there was an

[114] Letter from C.M.G. Oglivie, Officiating Home Secretary, Punjab to All Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners in the Punjab, dated 11 July 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

[115] Letter from Oglivie, Officiating Home Secretary, Punjab to the Secretary to the Government of India, Army Department, dated 14 June 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

[116] *Ibid*. and Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930.

[117] Letter from Oglivie to All Commissioners and Deputy Commissioners in the Punjab, dated 11 July 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

[118] Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930; Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930; FR(2) July 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[119] This was despite the fact that at the third session of the Punjab Workers' and Peasants' Party, held at Rohtak along with the fifteenth session of the Provincial Political Conference in March 1929, an attempt had been made to "affect the loyalty of ex-soldiers" by referring to the treatment given to Anup Singh's men in Lahore (in January 1929). This attempt had been dismissed as not having had much effect. FR(1) March 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

anti-British sentiment that was becoming evident. The first meeting held in July, in Chokhan Village in Hoshiarpur District, was reported to be proof of the fact that "among Anup Singh's adherents are a certain number of ex-soldiers who are definitely hostile to Government and who would not hesitate to join an anti-Government movement...."[120] By September Anup Singh had issued posters calling upon ex-servicemen to gather in large numbers at the annual conference of the Central Sikh League being held in Lyallpur on 11 and 12 October. The Central Sikh League was an organization that represented the radical nationalist elements among the Sikhs and his choice of its conference as the venue for his rally was indeed reflective of a desire to establish contact with anti-government nationalist forces. He also announced a demonstration in Lahore in December in the Congress week—again important because the annual session of the Congress was being held in Lahore at that time.[121] Besides, in his propaganda to prepare for the December *jatha*, he was reported to have "gone to the extent of urging ex-soldiers to support the Congress". The recruiting officer of Jullundur District had already reported to the deputy director of Military Intelligence in August 1929 that Anup Singh's propaganda was very dangerous and was being fanned by "other seditious leaders" as well. He had also begun to receive the support of newspapers such as *Milap*, *Zamindar Gazette*, *The Akali* and *Inqilab*.[122]

By the third week of November, when it became increasingly clear that Anup Singh's campaign was continuing strong in many districts and that he was determined about the December demonstration and that all the government's assumptions about his declining influence were proving wrong, the government finally initiated a series of steps to handle the situation. It asked the army department on 21 November to send specially selected officers to tour in the Labana villages of Sheikhupura and Lyallpur districts as well as in the Hoshiarpur District—the three most affected areas.[123] A week later the Chief Secretary, H.W. Emerson, addressed a long letter to H.D. Haig, the Home Secretary to the Government of India, giving

[120] Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930. There had also been a meeting in May in Hoshiarpur District where in the presence of a large number of ex-soldiers a letter supposed to have been written by Anup Singh was read out which advised the formation of *jathas* by *tehsils* and *thanas* to force the government's hand. FR (2) May 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[121] FR(2) September 1929, FR(2) October 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929; Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, *H.P.* File 233/1930.

[122] *Ibid*.

[123] *Ibid.*; FR(2) November 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929; Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930. Interestingly, a proposal for sending a special officer, made in early October 1929, had been turned down. Report by E.H. Kelly, dated 11 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930.

a full account of the past history of the movement and detailing the dangers inherent in the proposed demonstration in the Congress week in an atmosphere already charged with the threats of an extremist–moderate split in the Congress and communal assertion by sections of Sikhs and Muslims. He also listed the action being taken and the steps proposed to be taken, which included a notice to be issued around 5 December warning all concerned that participation in the *jatha* will mean non-eligibility for land grants. He also proposed taking action under the Criminal Procedure Code and, if absolutely necessary, the declaration of the Association as an unlawful organization.[124]

The tour reports by the special officers deputed to counteract Anup Singh's influence further confirmed the extent of the discontent as well as revealed the causes that underlay it. For example, Lt. Col. W.A.H. Bird of the Corps of Sikh Pioneers, who toured the Labana villages of Sheikhupura, reported to the chief of the General Staff that the general condition in the district, though not bad, was difficult and that all those who had no land or animals of their own and "depend on casual employment for their living definitely find it difficult to get enough to eat".[125] And since Labanas were a low caste, with much less access to land than the dominant landowning caste of the Jats, it is understandable that they were more affected and therefore more susceptible to Anup Singh's persuasion. (In this context, it is very significant that the main recruiting ground for Anup Singh's activities were reported to be the Labanas of Sheikhupura and Lyallpur and the peasants of Hoshiarpur,[126] a district with extremely small holdings.) Lt. Col. Bird also acknowledged that the Labanas who served during the War had undoubtedly been promised land by the civil recruiters. And knowing that many of their own class had received

[124] Letter from H.W. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930. The last proposal, of declaring the Association unlawful under the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act, was rejected by the Home Department and the Army Department of the Government of India on the ground that "such action would be liable to misunderstanding and misrepresentation, not only in the Army in India, but generally in England, and it would be alleged that special powers have been invoked to prevent a body of ex-soldiers representing their grievances to government". See exchange of letters between H.D. Haig, Home Secretary, Government of India and G. Mackworth Young, Army Secretary, Government of India, dated 29 November 1929 and 2 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930.

[125] Copy of a report of No. 2/Tour, dated 6 December 1929, from Lt. Col. W.A.H. Bird, the Corps of Sikh Pioneers, Sheikhupura, to Chief of the General Staff, Army Headquarters, New Delhi, *H.P.* F. 233/1930.

[126] See, for example, letter from W.H. Emerson, Chief Secretary, Punjab, dated 27 November 1929, *H.P.* F. 138/1930. This was also confirmed by reports of tours conducted by army officers in different districts of Punjab during 1930. See, for example, reports on the tours in Lyallpur, Jullundur and Sheikhupura and Montgomery districts carried out in August, February and April 1930 respectively, *H.P.* F. 265/1930.

land grants, they "cannot or will not understand why they also have not received a land grant." This combination of circumstances, which also included generally bad economic conditions and the fact that these men got used to a better standard of living during the war, and that many of them were discharged without even a pension, "has created discontent... [and] these are the men who will fall victim to Anup Singh's propaganda".[127]

Thus, reinforced with first-hand reports of the degree of discontent prevalent, and wary of the new political linkages of the agitationists, the government began to enact what was to be the final act in this extraordinary story. A notice warning all those who might participate in the *jatha* that they would forfeit all rights to being considered for grants of land was issued and Anup Singh was served on 14 December with a notice to show cause why his securities should not be forfeited. Anup Singh was brought to trial, a fresh case was also instituted against him and proceedings under the Criminal Procedure Code launched against his lieutenants in Hoshiarpur, Sheikhupura, Lyallpur, Gurdaspur and Amritsar. Despite this, 200 ex-soldiers turned up in Lahore and "adopted such an unruly attitude that it had to be declared an unlawful assembly". Some dispersed, but about 110 had to be arrested. This effectively brought the movement to an end.[128]

Anup Singh's movement is fascinating in a myriad variety of ways, both, for what it was and for what it was not. For one, it showed how a section traditionally considered "safe" and "loyal" by the government could become influenced by the general mood prevailing in society once the conditions were ripe. The ex-soldiers who came to Anup Singh's *jathas* were mostly Sikhs and this is important because it reflected the deep politicization that had occurred among the Sikh peasantry as a result of the various movements preceding this one, among which the Akali Movement undoubtedly was the most important. It also showed the possible consequences for the British of the type of recruitment that had to be resorted to during the First World War when men were in short supply and the army had to go beyond its traditional recruiting grounds—to communities like the Labanas which had not been rendered "safe" by long years of ideologization that they constituted the "martial races" who were the sword-arm of the Empire and whose loyalty was rewarded by generosity on the part of the rulers. The traditionally designated "martial races" could be kept "loyal" through a selective system of rewards but then the groups that expected rewards in return for service became too large, and the initial generosity

[127] Report of Tour in Sheikhupura district by Lt. Col. Bird, dated 6 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930.

[128] FR(1) and (2) December 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929; *The Tribune*, 18 and 22 December 1929.

made possible by the developing canal colonies became impossible as the canal colonies filled up. Such groups then flocked to the agitator who promised returns through struggle.

The sudden demise of the movement after December 1929, as well as its sporadic character before that, also demonstrated the weaknesses of a movement that depends too heavily on the personality of a charismatic leader who emerges to answer the needs of a specific situation. Once that leader is removed, or turns his back, the movement collapses. This points to the necessity of the building up of an organization, with a continuing line of leadership, which is not dependent on one individual.

Further, the way the movement was finally handled also demonstrates the tough line the government was willing to take when it realized that its sources of recruitment might get contaminated and a wrong message might go to serving soldiers that government was soft towards indiscipline. It came down hard, much harder than it would have against comparable civilian agitation, not even allowing a peaceful demonstration to be held once it saw the dangerous potential of the movement.[129] Till the basic loyalty of the ex-soldiers was not in doubt, and they were thought of as discontented but misguided, they were treated with kid gloves, but once their loyalty was in question, the mailed fist came into full view. The understanding reflected in this was that harsh treatment of genuinely loyal ex-soldiers would alienate the serving soldiers and the communities from which they were drawn, but softness towards disloyal elements would send the wrong signals about the incapacity and softness of the state, which in itself would be an invitation to disloyalty.

On the Eve of the National Struggle

The end of the year 1929 is a good point at which to stop and take stock of the previous few years, for after this, with the launching of the Civil Disobedience Movement and the manifestation of the effects of the Great Economic Depression, a new phase of peasant protest and organization began. It was clear that by now a considerable ferment existed among sections of the peasantry, and there was evidence also of a willingness to take to the path of agitation and struggle for the assertion of one's

[129] In this context, it is pertinent that the measures suggested by the special army officer who toured some of the affected areas were even harsher than the ones actually implemented by the Punjab Government. He had suggested that the pensions of those who participated in *jathas,* etc., should be taken away, they should be arrested and prosecuted and land revenue remissions be withdrawn from the villages whose inhabitants join any *jatha*. Report of tour in Sheikhupura District by Lt. Col. Bird, dated 6 December 1929, *H.P.* F. 233/1930.

demands.[130] Political organizations had also become more aware of the need to mobilize and organize the peasantry around their own demands and in their own organizations—and not only for wider social and political objectives such as gurdwara reform or Indian independence. A distinct left-wing had also emerged which by its very nature was clearly committed to the task of mass organization and mobilization around class demands. Besides, this left-wing moved inevitably towards the rural masses, in the absence of a substantial industrial labour force in the province. This process was facilitated by the fact that a large section of the left, especially those from Ghadar Party background, were of peasant origin and had a natural affinity with the needs, urges and ethos of the peasantry. Also, the fact that many of the activists of the left had emerged from one or other of the militant anti-imperialist movements known for their heroic sacrifices—Ghadar, Non-Cooperation, Akali, Babbar Akali, NJBS—gave them a certain prestige and established their bona fides among the rural masses which enabled them to carry conviction. Consequently, they were able, in the relatively short time of a couple of years, to make their presence felt in a number of local struggles and advance the process of politicization of the peasants.

Further, through the different struggles, big and small, and via the process of ideological advance that occurred in these years, the broad outlines of a programme—a charter of demands—had also begun to emerge. It was evident that remission of various government taxes, especially when crops failed or some other disaster struck, and cancellations or prevention of enhancements of existing rates of taxes were major issues around which peasants were willing to agitate. Similarly, other government impositions such as the Village Patrol Act were resented. The demand for a basic reform in the inequitable system of land revenue had also been articulated in a particularly telling manner by means of its comparison with the principles of income tax assessment and had attracted a rare degree of unanimity. However, many demands were yet to emerge with any force, as for example, those specifically affecting tenants or agricultural labourers. Similarly, the demand for a solution to the problem of indebtedness had yet to

[130] Apart from the protest movements and the demands discussed here, one can list a considerable variety of issues on which peasants came out to assert their views and demand change. For example, complaints were voiced against the Canal Department for arbitrary re-modelling of canal outlets and distributaries, changes in water rates, closure of canals in the summer months, shortage of canal water, especially for poorer and weaker landowners, arbitrariness in giving compensation for water-logged land, etc. Others wanted changes in conditions on which land grants were made for horse-breeding purposes and for supplying grass. Land revenue and water rates remissions were demanded as were generous grants of *taqavi* loans and opening of famine relief works. These demands were expressed through deputations, representations, resolutions, letters to the editor, telegrams to the governor, meetings and conferences.

be formulated. As is obvious, the drawing up of a programme marks a critical stage in the development of a movement and therefore the initiation of this process was an important achievement.

However, what had clearly not emerged yet were stable peasant organizations, whether at the village, tehsil, district or provincial levels. The early effort, in 1925, by the Congress, which flowed out of the momentum generated by the water rates agitation, had died out rather quickly and after that the pattern was that the leadership and the organization of the agitations was provided by different political parties and groups that happened to be functional at that time, rather than through any stable peasant organizations. The Punjab Zamindar League, however, did function with a certain degree of continuity, held annual sessions, though not regularly, and also had some district-level branches, though only very few of these functioned with any consistency. Also, despite the fact that, at this stage, with Choudhuri Chhotu Ram out of office and probably therefore in a militant mood and also because its political complexion was not yet very clear (as it became during the Civil Disobedience Movement), it was able to attract to itself some nationalist political activists committed to the peasantry, it was not able to really build up either at the provincial or at the grass-roots level a really stable and representative organization. The reliance on individuals such as Chaudhuri Chhotu Ram and other local notables and members of the Legislative Council was indicative of a style of politics very different from the one needed for the building up of a strong peasant organization.

It is also to be noted that the limits of the area covered by the peasant struggles were defined very much by the political map of the political movements that were their predecessors: Central Punjab and pockets in southeast Punjab (present-day Haryana). Western Punjab had remained outside the ambit of these movements and continued to remain untouched by peasant resistance as well. In this respect, the pattern of future peasant struggles was also anticipated, thus pointing to the intimate connection between generalized political consciousness and resistance on specifically peasant issues—a connection we shall explore at length in chapters 8 and 12.

The ferment and the churning that occurred in these years as a result of the mass political movements, the peasant struggles and the new movements with their radical new ideologies, were an essential pre-requisite for the qualitative leap forward that the peasant movement in Punjab made in the subsequent years. Experiences were gained, contacts established and lessons learnt; different techniques of struggle were tried out and their effectiveness tested; the tolerance levels of the government were determined—all of which was to prove invaluable in the years to come.

THREE

Marching with the Nation: Peasants and Civil Disobedience, 1930–32

The Lahore session of the Indian National Congress in the last week of the year 1929, which declared complete independence as the aim of the Congress and also resolved upon a movement of civil disobedience to be launched shortly, brought to a culmination the nation-wide process of politicization and ferment that had been gathering strength at least since 1928, a process marked by the signs of a new militancy and ideological radicalization among the intelligentsia, the youth and among many sections of peasants and workers. The tone of the new stage was reflected in Jawaharlal Nehru's declaration in his presidential address to the Lahore Congress:

> I must frankly confess that I am a socialist and a republican, and am no believer in kings and princes, or in the order which produces the modern kings of industry, who have greater power over the lives and fortunes of men than even the kings of old, and whose methods are as predatory as those of the old feudal aristocracy.[1]

The Punjab Congress had begun in 1929 to prepare for the coming struggle. After the Provincial Political Conference held at Rohtak in March which was attended by major national leaders such as Motilal and Jawaharlal Nehru, a deputation of provincial Congressmen began to tour the rural areas of the province for propaganda and enlistment of members.[2] Dr Satyapal's arrest in early May disoriented the touring for a short while, but it was soon resumed.[3] In July, the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee (PPCC) appointed a committee to revamp the Congress organization, try

[1] *Selected Works of Jawaharlal Nehru*, general editor, S. Gopal, 15 volumes, New Delhi, 1972–82, Vol. 4, p. 192.
[2] FR(1) March 1929, FR(2) April 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.
[3] FR(1) May 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

to enrol the provincial quota of roughly 52,000 members and set up training camps for volunteers.[4] By the beginning of September, the enrolment had reached 28,000.[5] Besides this, the Punjab Congress had been very active in the celebration of Bhagat Singh–Dutt days, taking out of *jathas* and making collections for the Defence Fund for the Conspiracy Case prisoners.[6] The NJBS, in its turn, was assisting the Congress in its campaign of propaganda through enrolment of members and setting up of Congress committees.[7] An index of the cooperation between the two was Jawaharlal Nehru's presence at the third provincial NJBS conference in August.[8] The holding of the annual session of the Congress in Lahore in December, the preparations that had to be made for it, the excitement generated by its momentous decisions, all contributed to the building up of the tempo for the phase of mass struggle that was about to begin.

The Countdown Begins

The decision at Lahore that a mass campaign of civil disobedience would soon be inaugurated immediately resulted in a flurry of activity all over the province. And the rural areas, with which we are concerned here, were soon alive with a whole variety of agitations and mobilization. The Congress had designated 26 January 1930 as the day on which the Independence resolution passed by the Lahore Congress would be read out and repeated at public meetings all over the country; and mobilization began for making 26 January a success. Meetings asking people to get ready for the coming struggle and come to the Independence Day meetings were held in many parts of the province, including in villages. On 26 January, another round of meetings was held and thus the preparations for civil disobedience were set in motion. *Jathas* of volunteers were soon reported to be roaming the villages.[9]

The essential message being conveyed through speeches at meetings and articles and poems in the vernacular newspapers was that of preparing for struggle.[10] The importance of organization or *jathebandi* was emphasized

[4] FR(1) July 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[5] FR(1) September 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929; *AICC Papers*, F.P-30(111) of 1929, Supplement to Congress Bulletin, September 27, 1929.

[6] FR(1) and (2) July 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[7] FR(2) June, FR(2) July, FR(1) October, 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[8] FR(1) August 1929, *H.P.* F. 17/1929.

[9] FR(2) January, FR(1) and (2) February, FR(1) and (2) March, and FR(1) April 1929, *H.P.* F. 18/II/1930, 18/III/1930, 18/IV/1930 and 18/V/1930. Also see *H.P.* F. 173/I/1930 which gives the prosecutions launched in this period against individual speakers and newspapers and journals.

[10] This paragraph and the next three paras, except when otherwise indicated, are based on the extracts of speeches and articles that formed the basis of prosecutions, which are reproduced along with the statement of prosecutions in *H.P.* F. 173/I/1930.

and people's confidence was sought to be built up by constant references to the small number of Englishmen as compared to the vast numbers of Indians. The exploitative nature of British rule was illustrated through a wide variety of examples and the necessity, therefore, of driving out the British brought home. After this common ground was covered, the speakers or the article-writers then put their own ideological stamp on the message. A large section had been obviously influenced by socialist ideas to a greater or lesser degree, as borne out by the constant references to the need to organize workers and peasants and establish their rule.

Among the committed leftists, those belonging to the NJBS were very active in the preparations for the Civil Disobedience Movement (as well as later during the movement). They were unequivocal in extending their support to the Congress in this struggle. Though they naturally did not highlight the aspect of non-violence as did other Congressmen, they nevertheless made it clear that for the present they were working under Congress discipline. They also took great pains to negate the impression that they were anarchists and emphasized that they believed in a socialist order of society.

Members of the Kirti Kisan Party, on the other hand, because of their close connection with the Communist International, found it difficult to flout the sectarian line being advanced at this time, though many, especially those who had come from a Ghadar background such as Karam Singh Chhina and Bhag Singh, continued to work within the Congress throughout the sectarian period. The Kirti activists who participated in the process of mobilization for the Civil Disobedience Movement also inevitably laid greater emphasis on the need to organize the masses and on popularizing the notion of *kisan mazdoor raj* or workers' and peasants' state.[11]

However, a common point amongst almost all the propaganda effort at this time was the emphasis that civil disobedience meant the non-payment of taxes to the government and that peasants should get ready for this. Another common feature that strikes one sharply is the secular tone of all the propaganda and the absence of any appeals to religious sentiment—and this was true of leftists as well as non-leftists. On the contrary, the necessity of communal amity and of special efforts to get Muslims to participate in the movement was invariably stressed.

Apart from these general preparations for the impending struggle, there was also in the first three months of 1930 a resurgence of activity around

[11] For example, at the Kirti Kisan Conference held in Lahore at the end of December 1929, the proceedings were marked by an anti-Congress tone, but in a Kirti Kisan Political Conference at Hissar on 21 and 22 February 1930, participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement was advocated by many speakers. See *H.P.* F. 98/1930 and 173/I/1930. Harkishen Singh Surjeet also testifies to the fact that the Ghadar-based Kirtis continued to work in the Congress through this period (interview).

some specific agrarian issues. In Amritsar, for example, there was an agitation led by the Amritsar Zamindar Sabha, an organization comprised of "Sikhs of Congress mentality", against the proposed resettlement of the district. A series of meetings were held in January and soon the government announced a postponement for five years. Posters announcing meetings were found to have been printed at the Kirti press in Amritsar, thus indicating the Kirti Kisan Party's support to the agitation.[12] What is significant, however, is the fact that though the demand for postponement had been voiced a full six months earlier by the moderate Zamindar Association,[13] it was only in January 1930 in the new atmosphere generated by the coming struggle that it became an issue around which agitation was organized.

Similarly, in Hissar in the southeast of the province, the agitation against the landlords of the Skinners' Estate was revived in February. A deputation of the Kisan Sabha touring the villages was joined by peasants of other parts of Hissar and also of the neighbouring state of Faridkot and contributions poured in from many sources. The Skinners refused to relent or to implement the agreement entered into the previous year by one of them and instead adopted a threatening posture.[14] The protests continued till early April when the government began a policy of repression. Arrests and prosecutions of tenants were launched and by 22 April, 18 tenants had already been sentenced to a month's imprisonment with fine and another 31 arrested.[15] There was trouble between tenants and landlords also at Daulatpur in Hissar District a little later in April, which included forcible removal of crops by tenants, arrests by the police, clashes between the tenants and the police and the like.[16]

In the neighbouring district of Rohtak, which was the biggest Congress stronghold in southeast Punjab, there was trouble between the tenants, who were mostly Ahirs, and the jagirdars, who were Pathans, in a place called Chhuchhakwas in the Jhajjar Tehsil. The tenants alleged that the police and local officials were in league with the landlords and therefore had put 10 tenants in the police lock-up. They also wanted an impartial inquiry into the murderous assault on a tenant who was now lying in a serious condition in hospital. With all these complaints and demands in mind, 100 tenants marched to Rohtak from Chhuchhakwas on 3 April with the intention of seeing the governor who was on a visit to the town. They were

[12] FR(1) January and FR(2) February 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/II/1930, and 18/III/1930.

[13] *The Tribune*, 30 June 1929.

[14] *The Tribune*, 14 February 1930.

[15] *The Tribune*, 22 April 1930; Appreciation of situation in Punjab, dated 19 April 1930, from Punjab Government to Government of India, *H.P.* F. 250/I/1930; FR(1) and (2) April 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/V 1930.

[16] Appreciation of situation in Punjab, dated 22 April 1930, from Punjab Government to Government of India, *H.P.* F. 250/I/1930.

persuaded by the deputy commissioner to leave on the promise of an inquiry, which was, however, never fulfilled. Instead, arrests and prosecutions were launched under the general cover of dealing with the Civil Disobedience Movement.[17]

Civil Disobedience: Round One

With the breaking of the salt law by Gandhiji at Dandi on 6 April 1930, the Civil Disobedience Movement was formally launched. In Punjab as well, attempts were made to sustain a salt *satyagraha*[18] but the scope for it being limited given the landlocked nature of the province, concentration soon shifted to the picketing of foreign cloth and liquor shops. This programme, especially the boycott of foreign cloth shops, proved popular in the villages as well.[19] By early May, the activity had reached a high pitch as a result of the combined effect of the Peshawar incident, Gandhiji's arrest and the firing at the Sisganj Gurdwara in Delhi. There was a sharp rise in the number of *jathas* and individual activists going about the rural areas—some were going to Peshawar to express solidarity with the victims of Martial Law, others protesting the firing at Sisganj and still others carrying on the rest of the nationalist propaganda.[20]

On 15 May 1930, the Congress Working Committee gave permission to the PCCs to begin the campaign of non-payment of land revenue wherever they thought fit.[21] This immediately led in Punjab to an intensification of activity connected with encouraging the non-payment of land revenue.[22] By the end of May the situation on this front was serious enough for the

[17] *The Tribune,* 2 April 1930. Statement in court of Mangli Ram, Secretary, Tenants' Panchayat, Chhuchhakwas, who was awarded two years' rigorous imprisonment along with two others in July 1930. He maintained that a false case had been made against him because the DC was angry with him for his involvement in the tenants' struggle and because he regularly spoke from the Congress platform as well as wrote in the *Haryana Tilak,* a Congress newspaper of Rohtak, about the corruption of police and other lower officials. *H.P.* F. 173/IV/1930.

[18] FR(2) April 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/V/1930. In Rohtak District, volunteers were sent directly by Gandhiji to assist the movement. *Ibid.* Ujagar Singh Bilga describes how they organized salt *satyagraha* in his village Bilga in Jullundur District. Huge crowds would collect and every fourth day a batch of 25 would offer *satyagraha.* He too was later arrested (interview).

[19] FR(2) April 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/1930. Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, of Amritsar District, a young man at that time, recounts how he used to go around the villages singing songs about Gandhiji and charkha, organize *jathas* and go for picketing of foreign cloth shops. Arrests and fines would follow, and the volunteers would then collect money from the villages to pay off the fines. He himself was arrested twice during the course of the movement. Picketing of foreign cloth shops was a very strong movement, he says (interview).

[20] FR(1) and (2) May 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/VI/1930.

[21] Resolution of Congress Working Committee, 15 May 1930. *H.P.* F. 257/III/1930.

[22] FR(2) May 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/IV/1930.

Punjab Government to ask for the extension of the ordinance which granted powers to arrest and prosecute those who incited others not to pay taxes.[23] The powers under this ordinance were then freely used by the district authorities to arrest those involved in promoting this campaign.[24] In all, 800 persons were prosecuted under the Unlawful Instigation Ordinance alone, of which 737 were actually convicted.[25] And these arrests were only of those who were "instigating" others not to pay the land revenue, that is,

[23] The Government of Punjab wrote to the Home Department of the Government of India that speakers at meetings had been advocating non-payment of land revenue in Amritsar, Lahore and Sheikhupura rural tracts. Small *jathas* were also touring the central districts preaching this message. Therefore they wanted to notify Ordinance VI of 1930, known as the Unlawful Instigation Ordinance. The Ordinance was notified on 5 June 1930. See Express letters dated 25/27 May and 12 June 1930 from Punjab Government to Home Department, Government of India, *H.P.* F. 503/II/1930. The Fortnightly Report for the second half of May had also struck an alarmist note and said that the ordinance was passed at the most opportune time. See FR(2) May 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/VI/1930.

[24] For arrests and prosecutions on this count, see, for example, *The Tribune,* 22 April 1930, for 31 arrests in Hissar; 20 June 1930, for 31 arrests in Rohtak; 21 June 1930, for arrests in Amritsar and Sheikhupura districts; 27 June 1930, for arrests in Amritsar District; 29 June 1930, for arrests in Lahore; 20 July 1930, for arrests in Amritsar; 25 July 1930, for arrests in Sheikhupura; 12 August 1930, for arrests in Amritsar. A few examples of prosecutions for instigation to refuse payment of taxes: Hakim Nur-ud-din, one of the chief organizers of the Congress movement in Lyallpur, sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment; Ghazi Sultan Mahmud, Congress worker, prosecuted for speech advocating non-payment of land revenue at a meeting in village Bhalike in Sheikhupura District on 8 April 1930, *H.P.* F. 173/II/1930. Mangli Ram and two others in Jhajjar, Rohtak District, for speeches advocating non-payment of land revenue; Kishen Singh Akali, for speech at Guru Ka Bagh, Amritsar District, on 13 May, advocating *jathebandi* and preaching non-payment of land revenue in rural areas of Amritsar District; Mangal Singh Kuka, for speeches in Sheikhupura District, demanding reduction of land revenue, on 8 April and 25 May 1930, *H.P.* F. 173/IV/1930. Gian Chand, Superintendent, Congress Volunteer Corps. Sheikhupura, for speeches at Nankana Sahib, Sheikhupura District, on 16 June 1930, asking people not to pay land revenue, *H.P.* F. 173/V/1930. Ram Saran Das Mahajan for a speech in Rohtak, 25 January 1930, saying do not pay land revenue and that he will repeat it in every village, for which he was sentenced to 3 years rigorous imprisonment, *H.P.* F. 173/I/1930 and 173/II/1930. Giani Kartar Singh, for speech at Lyallpur, saying do not pay revenue to government, pay it to Congress, set up a parallel administration, for which he was given one year's rigorous imprisonment; seven speakers at Kirti Kisan Sabha Conference in Hissar District, 21 and 22 February 1930, many of whom advocated non-payment of revenue on same lines as Bardoli in Gujarat and Garhi village in Hissar; Sri Ram Sharma, Mohan Swami and Hari Singh of Jhajjar, Rohtak District, for speeches on 9 February 1930 urging non-payment of revenue, boycott of tehsils and police stations, etc., *H.P.* F. 173/I/1930. Abnash Chandra Bali, active worker of NJBS, organizer of Punjab Students Union, for speeches at Sur Singh, Patti and Kasur in Lahore District on 3, 5 and 9 May 1930, advocating non-payment of land revenue, *H.P.* F. 173/II/1930. Sodhi Pindi Das, well-known NJBS activist, member of Punjab Congress, for saying in a speech at Sheikhupura on 11 June 1930 that he was glad that 63 villages of the district had decided to refuse land revenue, *H.P.* F. 173/III/1930.

[25] *H.P.* F. 215/1932; *PLCD,* Vol. XXII, 7 November 1932.

of the cadre or volunteers. In fact, from all accounts, the chances of a no-tax movement taking off were very high till July 1930. In the Legislative Council, for example, members repeatedly warned the government that the situation in the villages was quite conducive to such a development.[26] The government's own reports also continued to point to the danger[27] and in later assessments as well acknowledged that "a strong agitation" had developed in certain parts against the payment of land revenue.[28] The agitation in Sheikhupura in the Virk Sikh villages which threatened to involve about 80 villages was curbed only by the end of July with the help of almost 100 arrests of leading agitators, a major clash being averted only in the nick of time in the village of Varn.[29] Besides Sheikhupura, the districts of Amritsar, Lahore, Lyallpur, Rohtak and Hissar were the other centres where the agitation had assumed a serious shape.[30] The inclusion of the demand for reduction of land revenue by half in Gandhiji's 11-point charter of demands sent to the viceroy before commencement of the movement was also used very effectively in the propaganda to make the point that a national government will reduce the land revenue burden.[31] The fall in prices because of the Depression, which began to be felt strongly around May, also became a part of the *raison d' etre* for the no-revenue campaign.[32] The non-payment of revenue was thus urged on both grounds, political and

[26] See *PLCD,* Vol. XV, 11 March 1930; Vol. XVI, 23 July 1930; Vol. XVII, 8 November 1930. Even later, remissions of taxes were demanded on the ground that their refusal would lead to civil disobedience and non-payment of taxes. See, for example, *PLCD,* Vol. XVIII, 24 March 1931; Vol. XX, 1 December 1931.

[27] See, for example, FR(2) May 1930, FR(1) and (2) June 1930, FR(1) and (2) July 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/VI/1930, 18/VII/1930, 18/VIII/1930. Also see the "Report of a Tour by an Army Officer in Lahore district" in June 1930, *H.P.,* F. 265/1930.

[28] Statement by Sir Henry Craik, Finance Member, during discussion on Punjab Criminal Law Amendment Bill in Punjab Legislative Council on 7 November 1932. *H.P.* F. 215/1932; *PLCD,* Vol. XXII, 7 November 1932. The Bill was designed to incorporate into law the ordinance on incitement to refuse payment of government dues which had lapsed, and Sir Henry Craik's argument was that they had needed it in 1930 and could need it again, after the reforms, if a similar movement developed. He countered objections to the Bill which maintained that the Punjab peasant was not prone to non-payment of revenue by citing the example of the 1930 movement. *Ibid.*

[29] See FR(2) July 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/VIII/1930; *The Tribune,* 21 June and 26 July 1930; *AICC Papers,* Correspondence, No. 40, 1931.

[30] This is evident from the reports of the arrests, prosecutions and other accounts of activities. See footnote 24, this chapter.

[31] Volunteers arrested for instigation to refuse land revenue in Tharu village in Amritsar District made this point rather strongly. *The Tribune,* 12 August 1930. Also see, for example, the speeches for which the following were prosecuted: Hakim Nur-ud-din in Lyallpur said under an Indian government people will pay only half the land revenue, Abnash Chandra Bali made a similar point in Lahore District. *H.P.* F. 173/2/1930.

[32] See, for example, report on a tour by a military officer in Lahore District in June 1930, *H.P.* F. 265/1930. Also see *H.P.* F. 173/V/1932.

economic, as part of the general civil disobedience campaign to defy the authority of the government and because peasants just could not afford to pay.

The strong and prompt preventive action taken by the government succeeded in most places in nipping the movement for non-payment of taxes before it could really get off the ground, that is, before it reached the stage of mass refusal to pay taxes. This is not surprising, for the experience of other similar movements, such as Bardoli, shows that the success of a movement of this type depends crucially on the sophistication of the organizational set up and a prolonged period of ideological and organizational preparation. Non-payment of land revenue is in any case not an easy movement to generate since the ultimate penalty involves loss of land,[33] and in a situation where the organizers are removed *before* they have created the infrastructure for the sustenance of the movement, the chances of its success are very meagre. Nevertheless, there was enough chance of success to seriously worry the government for some time at least.

In any case, it would be a mistake to use the non-payment of revenue campaign as the only index for judging the impact of the Civil Disobedience Movement on the peasants, for the success of the no-revenue movement can be conditional on a host of factors. What is far more significant is whether the Civil Disobedience Movement produced a general change in attitudes and of this there is sufficient indication. Wherever the impact of the movement was felt, there was a generalized anti-British sentiment which also spilled over in the form of an anti-loyalist sentiment. This is very well brought out in the report of an army officer who conducted a special tour in the rural areas of the districts of Jhang, Lyallpur, Sheikhupura, Gujranwala, Gurdaspur and Lahore between early May and mid-June, the peak period of the Civil Disobedience Movement:[34]

> A "salam" is becoming comparatively rare along the main roads. Small collections of people in bus stops, at railway stations and in the outskirts of villages, on seeing isolated military officers, at once chorus "INKALAB ZINDABAD"—both old and young.... The fate of the old soldier and other loyalists in many villages is deplorable and elicits my deepest sympathy. They cannot worship except in khaddar clothing. Their fields are garnered with difficulty. Their labourers are cleared off by Congress agents. Their family cannot leave their houses without molestation, even for purposes of nature. They are not allowed to draw water at the village

[33] Chhotu Ram, for example, sought to play up the fear of loss of land in order to persuade peasants to stay away from the no-tax movement. This propaganda he had been carrying on consistently since the Non-Cooperation days. See Prem Chowdhury, *Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram*, pp. 145 ff.

[34] Notes on the situation in Lahore Brigade Area, dated 16 June 1930, *H.P.* F. 250/I/1930.

> wells, nor will the Congress agents allow the village *banias* to supply them. They are insulted at every turn and generally life is a burden. Why they remain loyal is a mystery to me. In addition, water does not reach their fields.... In some of the villages, loyal men go armed, with escorts, and are in daily fear of limb or even life. This applies also to certain loyal lumbardars whose loyalty is strained most unfairly. I do not wish to convey that the above conditions are by any means general. In many villages Congress has failed, but a straw shows the way the wind is blowing.

Another illustration of the new spirit abroad was the refusal of villagers to continue to perform *begar* and give free supplies to officials—a refusal which led to serious clashes in a number of cases. In fact, there were some villages which became famous in this period for the resistance they offered to the authorities, and it would be useful to look at them a little closely in order to discern the actual workings of the movement at the micro-level.

One such heroic village was Jhaman, in the district of Lahore. It was a village with a mixed Hindu, Muslim and Sikh population in which the Congress had been active for the last eight or nine years, carrying on its propaganda for khadi, liquor boycott, foreign cloth boycott, etc. Occasionally, meetings would also be held in the village. Since April 1930, activities were intensified once it became known that the government was going to appoint a punitive police post to keep a watch on the village. Regular daily meetings were held to which residents of neighbouring villages also flocked.[35]

The special police that was despatched to the village faced a total social boycott. The situation came to a head on 18 June when an additional police force was also refused eatables by shopkeepers. Angered by the defiance, the police brutally beat up the villagers, including women, who remained non-violent. More than one hundred were injured. The next day, on 19 June, troops with machine-guns were sent to the village and aeroplanes hovered overhead. The village was completely blockaded and 50 arrests were made. Neighbours wanting to show solidarity were refused permission to go into the village. Goods were then forcibly seized from shopkeepers, houses taken over for stationing the police, and arrested people tortured by tying them to *charpoys* and making them stand in the hot June sun.[36]

Despite all this repression, a month later the villagers were still refusing to let the policemen grind their grain at the flour-mill. Another clash soon

[35] Report of the Enquiry Committee appointed by the PPCC, *The Tribune*, 6 August 1930.

[36] *The Tribune*, 21 June 1930; Sardar Mangal Singh's report to the Congress War Council after personal enquiry in the village, *The Tribune*, 22 June 1930; Report of Lala Jagan Nath, Secretary, Congress War Council, Punjab, *The Tribune*, 24 June 1930; FR(2) June 1930, *H.P.* 18/VII/1930; Express Letter from Government, Punjab, to Home Department, Government of India, dated 19 June 1930, *H.P.* F. 250/I/1930.

ensued. A *jatha* that had come from a neighbouring village to attend a meeting in the village was obstructed and then the police went on to brutally attack the meeting itself. This clash, as had the last one, became the occasion for enquiries by the Congress, publicization of the enquiry reports, holding of protest meetings in the towns and public condemnation of police terror.[37] What is significant is that Jhaman had not even raised the issue of non-payment of taxes, or indeed offered any other form of civil disobedience, and yet its participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement was second to none.

A village in Amritsar District, Tharu, presented another interesting example of resistance which still did not involve non-payment of land revenue though the resistance was an outcome of nationalist propaganda that included exhortation to refuse to pay revenue. The story began on 10 June when *jathas* of Congress volunteers started from Tarn Taran, a nearby town, for carrying on propaganda in the villages, as was common at the time. They reached Tharu after holding a meeting at village Mirdi en route. All of them were arrested. After this, the Congress War Council continued daily to send *jathas* of volunteers to Tharu and every day they would be arrested on reaching the village. This continued till 22 June and obviously resulted in whipping up considerable enthusiasm in the area. Non-payment of taxes was a prominent part of the propaganda and the point about reduction of land revenue by half in Gandhiji's 11 points seems to have been brought home rather strongly.[38]

However, the arrests seemed to be having no effect in dampening the flow of volunteers or in curbing popular enthusiasm—an eye-witness relates how little boys would run after the *jathas*, which consisted of Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, shouting "Inqilab Zindabad" and "Mahatma Gandhi ki jai".[39] The government now changed its policy, it first started arresting volunteers before they reached the village and then stopped arresting them at all but blockaded the village and unleashed terror. Witnesses maintained that shops were broken open, sick men, women and children were beaten up brutally—all because they had looked after the *satyagrahi jathas* coming to the village and refused to supply the police on credit and demanded cash and all this despite having paid up the land revenue. Other

[37] Report of Enquiry Committee appointed by PPCC, *The Tribune*, 6 August 1930; Editorials in *The Tribune*, 24 June and 6 August 1930; *The Tribune*, 12 August 1930; FR(2) July 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/VIII/1930.

[38] Report of an Enquiry Committee appointed by the Amritsar Bar Association to look into police excesses in Tharu and Mirdi, Tarn Taran Tehsil, Amritsar District, *The Tribune*, 12 August 1930.

[39] The eye-witness account is by Sohan Singh Narangabadi, a veteran nationalist (and left) leader of Amritsar District, who was studying in Tarn Taran at that time and used to watch the daily *jathas* going to Tharu (interview).

reports also indicated that police anger was because they were used to getting everything free but the *satyagrahis* had persuaded villagers to refuse to give away anything for free.[40]

The village of Tharu was again, like Jhaman, symbolic of the spirit of civil disobedience despite no real refusal of revenue by peasants. As the course of events demonstrates, the Congress had just initiated the campaign by the sending of batches of volunteers preaching non-payment of land revenue, and the actual implementation could only be once the message had taken root, the resistance built up and the organizational structure at the village level geared up to handle the refusal of land revenue. But before that could come to pass, hard-hitting repression, involving both removal of the cadre who could perform the task of mobilization and organization and terrorizing of the peasants who had to implement the programme, was launched.

Jhaman and Tharu were not exceptions—this was the policy adopted in general once the movement appeared to be reaching dangerous proportions during May and June 1930. Special powers were quickly secured through ordinances,[41] district officers given a free hand,[42] the police and even the army used liberally to threaten and frighten.[43] In fact, in certain districts like Hissar and Rohtak, extensive arrests and prosecutions had been launched in April itself, and in others such as Amritsar public servants suspected of disloyalty were dismissed to serve as examples to others.[44]

[40] *The Tribune*, 21 and 27 June, 2, 4 and 5 July, 12 August 1930; Speech of Amar Singh Chabbal, Director, Amritsar War Council, at Jallianwala Bagh, Amritsar on 25 June 1930, *H.P.* F. 173/V/1930; FR(1) July 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/VIII/1930.

[41] See, for example, *H.P.* F. 503/II/1930; FR(2) May 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/VI/1930.

[42] See FR(2) April 1930, FR(2) May 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/V/1930 and 18/VII/1930.

[43] Clashes with police at the time of arrests were frequent. Additional police posts were appointed in a number of villages in Amritsar, Jullundur, Lahore and Rohtak districts. Reports of police excesses of the type unleashed in Tharu and Jhaman came from other villages also such as Jagdev Kalan in Amritsar, and the use of military force was contemplated against other villages, such as Nowshera Punnuan in Amritsar District. In the case of many "unsatisfactory" villages, army officers on tour took armoured cars and infantry in lorries to frighten them. Aeroplanes were used for reconnaissance and for breaking up several Congress meetings. FR(2) April 1930, FR(2) May 1930, FR(2) June 1930, FR(1) and (2) July 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/V/1930, 18/VI/1930, 18/VII/1930, and 18/VIII/1930; Report by Brigadier N.C. Bannatyne, Commanding Lahore Brigade Area, of tour in the villages of Jhang, Lyallpur, Sheikhupura, Gujranwala, Gurdaspur and Lahore, dated 16 June 1930, *H.P.* F. 250/I/1930; *The Tribune*, 17 August 1930 and 14 May 1931; Prem Choudhry, *Punjab Politics*, p. 149ff; Ujagar Singh Bilga (interview).

[44] FR(2) February 1930, FR(1) and (2) April 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/III/1930 and 18/V/1930. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, the veteran leader of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), recounts how he was asked to apologize and on refusing made to leave his school in the village because he had helped his father's associates of the Kirti Kisan Party, Baba Karam Singh Cheema and some others, to organize a small meeting in his village in 1930. He was at the time only 12 years old (interview). In Rohtak, lambardars who joined the Congress were dismissed. Prem Chowdhry, *Punjab Politics*, p. 150.

But large-scale repression was launched in early June and 2,381 arrests had already been affected between 1 June and 6 July.[45] Sentences ranging between one to two years of rigorous imprisonment were freely given.[46] In early June, Congress organizations active in directing the struggle such as the Punjab Provincial War Council, Amritsar District War Council, Punjab Provincial Satyagraha Committee as well as the Provincial NJBS and its branches were declared unlawful associations.[47]

Along with repression, a vigorous counter-propaganda campaign had also been launched. This propaganda took two forms, "official" and "non-official". "Official" propaganda was done by using the official machinery in an obvious way. Articles would be sent to newspapers by the director of the information bureau, which would describe the beneficient activities of various departments and so on. Government officials would talk to people and counter the Congress propaganda on various counts.[48] Army officers were sent to different areas to tour and meet ex-soldiers and others and counter any signs of disloyalty by listening to grievances, giving assurances, sorting out small problems and the like.[49]

But far more important, and effective, was the so-called non-official counter-propaganda in which the role of the government was to "advise and direct non-officials in their anti-Congress and pro-Government activities."[50] Non-official writers would be paid by the government to write articles which would then be placed in various newspapers. District officers were sent guidelines about the way in which they should talk to sympathetic non-officials and guide their activities.[51] For example, a letter was

[45] *The Tribune*, 10 July 1930; FR(1) and (2) June 1930, FR(1) and (2) July 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/VII/1930 and 18/VIII/1930.

[46] See, for example, *H.P.* F. 173/II/1930, 173/III/1930, 173/IV/1930, 173/V/1930. In Rohtak, a young man of 22 years was given a three-year sentence for a speech in front of an audience of 200–250 people. See Statement of Prosecution of Ram Saran Das Mahajan, Rohtak, *H.P.* F. 173/I/1930 and 173/I/1930.

[47] See *H.P.* F. 250/I/1930. Later, in September, the PPCC and all other Congress committees were declared illegal. FR(1) and (2) September 1930, *H.P.* 18/X/1930. By mid-October, the number of arrests had reached 5,858. The district-wise breakdown was: Lahore, 1184; Amritsar 894; Gujranwala 460; Sheikhupura 342; Lyallpur 341; Ludhiana 320; Ferozepore 269; Jullundur 232; Rohtak 184; Montgomery 177; Sialkot 168; Jhelum 153; Simla 134; Hissar 126; Hoshiarpur 125; Multan 123; Ambala 118; Rawalpindi 116; rest were under 100. *The Tribune*, 17 October 1930.

[48] Letter from D.J. Boyd, Chief Secretary, Punjab, to D.R. Prentice, Chief Secretary, Bengal, dated 17 May 1930, describing the nature of counter-propaganda in Punjab—in the Non-Cooperation Movement, in the Akali Movement and in the on-going Civil Disobedience Movement, *H.P.* F. 307/1930.

[49] See, for example, reports of such tours in *H.P.* F. 250/I/1930, F. 265/1930.

[50] Letter from D.J. Boyd, Chief Secretary, Punjab to D.R. Prentice, Chief Secretary, Bengal, dated 17 May 1930, *H.P.* F. 307/1930.

[51] *Ibid*.

circulated on 14 January 1930 by the chief secretary, Punjab, to the commissioners, deputy commissioners, and to the inspector-general, deputy inspectors-general and superintendents of police in Punjab which gave "certain lines of argument against the Congress programme" which may be of use "in suggesting lines of discussion of the Congress programme with non-officials".

Among the "lines of argument" suggested, the most significant was that the communistic and socialistic aspect of the Congress programme should be highlighted, obviously to frighten the "vested interests". To quote:[52]

> The Congress has not only declared itself the enemy of the Government as at present established, and of the British connection, but also of all stable interests in the country.... Under the guidance of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru the new Congress creed is derived from Moscow.... Pandit Jawaharlal in his address directly attacked the important interests on which the stability of the country depends. He attacked the landed proprietors, and it is clear that the independent India which the Congress has in view will not contain this class. The land is either to be nationalized or divided among the peasants.... Even if it were practicable to carry out this policy, the experience in Russia shows what disastrous effects it would have on production and the general economic condition of the country.... The Congress programme is a direct and real menace to all who own land, and unless they wish to see their interests trampled on, they must combine to oppose it. The wealth of *banias* and moneylenders will similarly be divided among the havenots.... The threat to industrial interests is equally definite.... In independent India there will be no room for the successful lawyer, the enterprising merchant, the thrifty shopkeeper, the efficient public servant or the private professional man.... Thus the Congress programme inevitably involves the economic and industrial ruin of the country.

Thus, official propaganda was carried out by "non-official" individuals and organizations, on lines laid down by the government. District Soldiers' Boards, for example, apparently autonomous organizations, were very active in anti-Congress propaganda.[53] So was Chhotu Ram through his Zamindar League in his native Rohtak District. Despite his emphasis that "the League was in no sense a Government movement" and that only "in the interests of the zamindars, the folly of civil disobedience and the non-payment of taxes was being disseminated throughout the District by means of lectures in villages", it was clear enough that his links with the

[52] Circular letter dated 14 January 1930 from the Chief Secretary, Punjab, *H.P.* F. 176/1930.
[53] *H.P.* F. 265/1930.

administration were very close. In the summer of 1930, the army officer touring the area for counter-propaganda made it a point to interview him and recorded that he was doing "very good work". He also pointed out that the reason for the Zamindar League and Chhotu Ram remaining "non-official" was that in "the view of Ch. Chhotu Ram concurred in by the D.C. ... their influence might weaken were they to come out as a Government Organization".[54] In fact, "non-official" loyalist activity during the Civil Disobedience Movement was quite visible, for example in the form of holding of meetings and obstructing Congress meetings and *jathas*.[55]

The net effect of the official onslaught on the movement, helped by the counter-propaganda effort, the natural exhaustion of the movement and the depletion of funds, was that by the end of August there was a marked decline in its tempo.[56] In September there was a brief flicker of the flame when a powerful movement appeared to develop in the hill district of Kangra in the form of a forest satyagraha or violation of forest laws, but this was quickly snuffed out by the arrests of the prominent agitators.[57] In October, there was a brief revival in Amritsar and Lahore on the news of the death sentence on Bhagat Singh;[58] in December the lapse of the Unlawful Instigation and Intimidation Ordinances led to another attempt at revival with meetings being held in the Karnal, Hoshiarpur, Ferozepore and Amritsar districts but the response was weak;[59] in January 1931, the release of leaders led to another spurt[60]—but there was no going back to the peak reached between May and July 1930.

In October 1930, however, a new development had occurred in the form of the setting up, by the extremist pro-Congress section of the Akalis led by Sardar Mangal Singh, of the Punjab Zamindar Sabha, an organization that would concentrate specifically on peasant demands. Its immediate focus

[54] Report by an army officer of a tour in the Rohtak and Gurgaon districts in the summer of 1930, *H.P.* F. 265/1930. For Chhotu Ram's intimate links with the administration, and his support in the anti-Congress campaign, see Prem Choudhry, *Punjab Politics*, pp. 143–64. Sir Fazl-i-Husain, the most important leader of the Unionist Party, at this point in the government, was also advising the Viceroy on how to carry on counter-propaganda against the Congress through non-official agencies. See his Note to the Viceroy, dated 7 March 1930. *H.P.* F. 35/28/1931.

[55] See, for example, FR(2) February 1930, FR(1) and (2) March 1930, FR(1) and (2) April 1930, FR(1) and (2) June 1930, FR(1) July 1930, FR(2) August 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/III/1930, 18/IV/1930, 18/V/1930, 18/VII/1930, 18/VIII/1930, 18/IX/1930.

[56] See FR(1) and (2) August 1930, FR(1) and (2) September 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/IX/1930, 18/X/1930.

[57] FR(1) and (2) September 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/X/1930.

[58] FR (1) October 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/XI/1930.

[59] FR(1) December 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/XIII/1930.

[60] FR(2) January 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/1931. In village Bilga in Jullundur, a 2000-strong demonstration was held against the additional police in the village and there was activity in the Karnal, Lyallpur, Ferozepore and Montgomery districts as well. *Ibid.*

was to be on the building up of an agitation for securing a reduction in land revenue and water rates, and if these demands were not conceded, to go over to non-payment of dues. However, more moderate sections of the Akalis succeeded in getting the newly-formed organization to commit itself, for the time being at least, to legal and peaceful methods of struggle, thus ruling out any agitation involving non-payment of taxes.[61] This new organization was not yet visible in the form of any mass activity, but local level miscellaneous peasant organizations began to get vocal around November in demanding reductions in land revenue and water rates in view of the fall in prices and also reductions in railway freight rates to port towns for Punjab agricultural products to facilitate exports.[62] The Zamindar Sabha of Lyallpur held a series of meetings in the villages, demanding that land revenue be collected in kind and not in cash. At some of these meetings, "which were probably inspired by the Akali Dal with the support of the Congress", speakers even advocated non-payment of land revenue. This worried the government for, in its assessment, given the extremely low prices, which were the only topic of conversation in the villages those days, "any prospect of a reduction in the taxes... must necessarily make a powerful appeal"; and it promptly ordered arrest of the activists.[63]

Struggle During Truce

A qualitative change came over the political atmosphere in the province (as in the rest of the country) once the national leaders were released in January and the process of negotiations between the Congress and the government began. Loyalists were disheartened and nationalists jubilant; these feelings increased once the Gandhi–Irwin Pact was signed.[64] The feeling of victory was expressed in the rousing welcomes given to released

[61] FR(1) and (2) October 1930, FR(1) and (2) 2: November 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/XI/1930 and 18/XII/1930; Letter from Sir Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Sir Fazl-i-Husain, Member for Education, Health and Lands in the Viceroy's Executive Council, dated 16 April 1931, *Fazl-i-Husain Papers*, Mss. Eur. E352.

[62] FR(1) November 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/XII/1930.

[63] FR(2) November 1930, *H.P.* F. 18/XIII/1930, FR(1) January 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/1931.

[64] Military officers touring the rural areas in February had already noted that the reports of the impending rapprochment between the government and the Congress were worrying the soldiers and other loyalist elements. The Gandhi–Irwin talks made the loyalists unhappy, but "Congress bodies and agitators (were) very pleased and consider it a great victory for the Congress". Report of tours by military officers in the Amritsar and Lahore districts in February 1931, *H.P.* F. 112/1931. Once the Gandhi–Irwin pact came into force, the discomfiture of the officials and loyalists grew while the nationalists were exultant. The necessity for the pact was explained: "weakness of agitation and a desire for peace were the dominating influence in Congress circles", and "all shades of opinion agree(d) that the Congress movement in the

prisoners.[65] Under the pact, repressive laws were also repealed and political organizations could again begin to function openly. Besides, since the government had entered into an agreement with the Congress, repressive government action came within the scope of the discussions on "violations" of the pact that Gandhi was regularly holding with the Home Member, and this is itself acted as a restraint.[66] All told, a certain degree of freedom, a certain political space was now again available which was quickly utilized by all the different political trends, and not just the Congress, to assert themselves.[67]

Punjab was exhausted". They also knew that this was true outside Punjab as well, as shown by the discussions at a secret meeting of prominent Congressmen held in Lahore on 31 January 1931, where Abdul Qadar Qasuri and Chaudhuri Afzal Haq gave their impressions, after visiting Congress strongholds like Meerut and Bombay, that "weakness and exhaustion were visible even in their strong points while other places have already laid arms and called halt". Their conclusion was that the best that could be done to "keep up appearances" was to maintain "Guerilla War tactics... in quarters where it is possible, lest the weakness be exposed which might seriously affect the peace negotiation". In this context, the welcome accorded to the pact was natural enough. The government noted that "the majority of the rank and file of Congress supporters and those who, though not active in agitation, sympathized with the movement have received the settlement with thankfulness". Supporters of the government were "disturbed by the evidence of the importance which is attached to securing the co-operation of the body with which they have consistently refused to co-operate and which many of them had fought with all their strength. Many district officers express the opinion that these considerations will deprive Government, if and when it finds itself again compelled to fight a hostile movement, of much of the active support it received throughout 1930." Reports of Tours by Military Officers in the Amritsar and Lahore districts in February 1931, *H.P.* F. 112/1931; FR(2) February 1931 and FR(2) March 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/I/1931 and 18/II/1931; Report by the D.S.P., City Kotwali, Lahore, dated 2 February 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/II/1931; FR(1) March 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/II/1931.

65 The atmosphere generated by the release of political prisoners was conveyed by the governor in the following words: "The moment leaders began to be released, tremendous meetings and processions were organised and are daily still taking place to greet them.... The numbers attending meetings and processions have been very large in Lahore (and to some extent in Amritsar)." Another official report also noted that the release of prisoners has meant that "processions and meetings have been common in many of the large towns and speeches have been made that would not have been tolerated before the settlement, the speakers relying on their immunity from prosecution". Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency to the Viceroy, dated 14 March 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/II/1931; FR(1) March 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/II/1931.

66 See, for example, *H.P.* F. 18/II/1931 and K.W.(kept with), F. 33/II/1931, F. 33/7/1931, F. 33/9/1931, F. 33/23/1931, F. 33/50/1931 and K.W.

67 In fact, the organization that took the greatest advantage of the freedom accorded by the Gandhi–Irwin Pact in Punjab was the NJBS. Meetings welcoming the political prisoners on their release were immediately made the occasion for condemning the government for its policy of refusing to pardon Bhagat Singh. At many meetings, the Congress and Gandhi also came in for attack for agreeing to a settlement without securing concessions for Bhagat Singh and his comrades. The Kirti Kisan Party was another group that was critical of the Congress but made full use of the "truce" period to extend its activities. FR(1) and (2)

The Congress first set itself to revamp its organization, which had been badly mauled by the repression and to consolidate its hold in the areas where its activity had been most intense.[68] Reports of *jathas* of volunteers visiting villages to form Congress committees began to appear and very soon rural conferences began to be organized, at which peasants were congratulated for their participation in the movement and told to prepare for the next round.[69] In some districts of south-eastern Punjab, such as Rohtak, Hissar and Karnal, an attempt was made from mid-April to set up a parallel government of sorts, with Congress thanedars appointed for each thana, and to hold public meetings in each large village every Sunday. This had the government seriously worried for a while, but the move seems to have fizzled out by June.[70] The Congress was also active in protesting against repressive action taken against its members during this period, as well as against forcible extraction of land revenue from peasants. By the end of the year, more attention began to be focused on the impending struggle that seemed about to break out.[71]

But apart from this general activity among the rural masses aimed at the consolidation of ground gained during the last round of struggle and

March 1931, FR(1) and (2) April 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/II/1931, 18/III/1931; Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 14 March 1931, and letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 15 April 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/II/1931; Speech of Governor, Punjab, on 25 April 1931, in reply to address presented by a deputation of Shahpur zamindars, and letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 9 May 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/I/1931 and K.W.

[68] This was in accordance with the instructions issued by Jawaharlal Nehru, the Congress President, to the Punjab PCC on 10 March 1931, immediately after the Gandhi–Irwin Pact: "It is vitally necessary that you should take immediate steps to consolidate the position gained by the Congress during the last year and to strengthen it still further. The immediate action to be taken is to send out our workers, those who have been discharged from jails, and others, to the villages to explain exactly what has been done in Delhi, further to see that there is no harassment or oppression of any kind in the rural areas.... If we now establish firmly definite centres of work and activity in rural areas, we shall strengthen our organisation and prepare the people for any contingency that might arise. I need not tell you that the provisional settlement at Delhi means truce only and no final peace. That peace can only come when we have gained our objective in its entirety." Copy of Intercepted letter by Jawaharlal Nehru sent by the CID, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, with forwarding letter dated 19 March 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/II/1931.

[69] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 3 April, 21 May, 28 May, 29 May, 5 June, 10 July, 19 December, 1931, 1 January, 6 January 1932; FR(2) March 1931, FR(2) and (2) April 1931, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, etc., *H.P.* F. 18/II/1931, 18/III/1931, 18/IV/1931; *H.P.* F. 33/I/1931 and K.W. and 33/II/1931.

[70] See FR(2) April 1931, FR(1) and (2), May 1931, FR(1) June 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/III/1931, 18/IV/1931, 18/V/1931.

[71] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 27, 28 May, 5, 17 June, 10 July, 1, 16 September, 19 December, 1931, 1 January 1932.

preparation for the next one, the period of the "truce" created by the Gandhi–Irwin Pact was remarkable for the upsurge witnessed in peasant activity involving a variety of political organizations, including the Congress. The fall in prices as a result of the world economic depression had really begun to hit the peasantry hard by now and the opportunity provided by the loosening of the repressive apparatus was quickly seized to voice the unanimous demand that the government do all it could to mitigate the situation. In this process of large-scale grass-roots mobilization, there was, on the one hand, a mushrooming of peasant organizations at the local level and, on the other, a trend towards their radicalization. It is to a discussion of these very significant developments in the peasant movement in Punjab that we now turn our attention.

Activity among peasants seems to have begun almost as soon as the lid was taken off, for in less than 10 days after the signing of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, the governor of Punjab was already writing in an alarmist vein to the viceroy:[72]

> Another menacing feature is the economic depression and the low prices of agricultural produce. Everyone is bidding for the favour of the poor cultivator and small peasant proprietor. The Kirti Kisan Party, since the Criminal Law (Amendment) Act was taken off, have come out in great fettle, and are bidding with the Sikh extremist 'Zamindar Sabha' for the ear of the rural masses. Both are bitterly anti-Government. There is no doubt the peasants are in a bad way. Some of the land revenue of the last harvest has been paid in rupees dating from early 'Victoria' and long out of circulation which shows the small men have had to dig up buried ancestral hoards of silver in order to pay at all.... Altogether, I don't like the look of things.

A month later, on 15 April, the chief secretary sent to the Government of India a list of speeches delivered since the beginning of March which included a number of those that discussed the issue of land revenue and encouraged its non-payment.[73] On 25 April the governor made a public statement that "although, under the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, it is expressly laid down that the movement for the non-payment of land revenue and other local dues will be discontinued, instances have been reported to me from various districts that in the month of April, at meetings and during processions of *jathas* in various districts, the non-payment of land revenue

[72] Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 14 March 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/II/1931.

[73] Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 15 April 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/II/1931.

has been directly advocated".[74] Two weeks later, on 9 May, the chief secretary sent to the Government of India a district-wise list of instances of incitement to refuse land revenue.[75] On 21 May the Government of Punjab announced remissions amounting to Rs 10.85 million in land revenue and water rates, the biggest in all the years of the Depression, and amounting to roughly one-third of the *rabi* demand for the year.[76] In less than three months of agitation, the Punjab peasants had secured one of the biggest concessions they had ever got. What was the nature and extent of the agitation and how had it snowballed so rapidly to produce such prompt results?

First, it was apparent that the condition of the peasants, especially the small-holders, was desperate and, this being the second year of the Depression, all reserves had been exhausted. In the summer and winter of 1930, attempts at agitation had been muted with the aid of repression that was justified by government in the general context of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The next instalment of land revenue payment for the *rabi* harvest—which is far more important in Punjab than the *kharif* since this is the wheat harvest—was becoming due, and the ability to pay had declined or even disappeared in many cases.[77] Simultaneously, there was a feeling of victory over the government because of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact and the perception among the people—"the ignorant, even the loyal ignorant", as the governor referred to them—that Gandhi "has done down Government and that the latter need not now be taken seriously".[78] In other words, the desperate economic situation in which subsistence itself was threatened provided the moral justification or legitimacy for protest and the political situation—with the government being perceived as having been weakened—the opportunity.

The opportunity began to be seized in March itself, with the Congress demonstrating the greatest activity in the southeastern districts of Rohtak, Karnal and Hissar, and the radical pro-Congress Akali Zamindar Sabha and the Kirti Kisan Party concentrating on the central districts of Amritsar, Lahore, Sheikhupura and Lyallpur. The NJBS was naturally more involved

[74] Speech of Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab, in reply to address presented by deputation of zamindars of Shahpur District, at Khushab, on 25 April 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/I/1931 and K.W.

[75] Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 9 May 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/I/1931 and K.W.

[76] *H.P.* F. 33/9/1931; *The Tribune*, 23 May 1931; FR(2) May 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/IV/1931.

[77] The Fortnightly Report for the first half of April noted that though the revenue for the last harvest had been collected without undue difficulty, except in Multan District, where a good deal of water rates demand was still outstanding, in the current *rabi* harvest, "the collections will be difficult, even in the absence of subversive agitation." FR(1) April 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/III/1931. Also see FR(2) April 1931, *Ibid.*

[78] Letter from Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 14 March 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/II/1931.

at this time with trying first to prevent the execution of Bhagat Singh and then with protests over the execution, though its workers also participated in the movement to some extent.[79] The Zamindar League led by Chhotu Ram had been pushed by the desperation of the economic situation and the necessity to retain its support-base in competition with the nationalists into taking a much more strident line than it was accustomed to and Chhotu Ram even agreed to hold a joint session of the Punjab Zamindar League with the Punjab Zamindar Sabha at Raewind in Lahore District on 4 April 1931. This was a development that had very important consequences, for it ended up in the "more or less constitutional Zamindar League... (being) swallowed up by the far more extreme Zamindar Sabha, though keeping its old name". Sardar Mangal Singh, a Congressman and a radical Akali and the brain behind the Akali Zamindar Sabha, was elected the general secretary of the League, and in addition, a nationalist-dominated Working Committee was elected. The changed character of the League was evident from the political resolutions passed, mourning the deaths of Motilal Nehru, Mohammad Ali and Bhagat Singh, urging the boycott of liquor and foreign cloth and demanding the release of political prisoners.[80] The government was obviously displeased at the new incarnation of the Zamindar League. The governor of Punjab wrote in a rather exasperated tone to Sir Fazl-i-Husain, now a member of the Viceroy's Executive Council:[81]

> I am not at all happy about the amalgamation between the Provincial Zamindara League and the Provincial Zamindara Sabha. The latter organisation was really started by Mangal Singh in order to get political support for himself by pretending to be very keen on the economic distress of the Sikh zamindars.... I warned Chhotu Ram that I thought the result of this amalgamation would be that his organisation would get dominated by Akali extremists.... This, I am afraid, has come to pass.

With the "conversion" of the Zamindar League, all the important organizations working among the peasants were now functioning within a broad anti-imperialist ideological framework. Regardless of whether the mobilization took place through the formal Congress organization as in the

[79] See FR(2) March 1931, FR(1) and (2) April 1931, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/II/1931, 18/III/1931, 18/IV/1931; *The Tribune*, 12, 24 April, 1, 8, 16, 20, 21, 23 May 1931; *H.P.* F. 33/I/1931 and K.W.; F. 33/II/1931.

[80] FR(1) April 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/III/1931; *The Tribune*, 9 April 1931; Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 9 May 1931, *H.P.* F. 33/I/1931 and K.W.; Ujagar Singh Bilga (interview).

[81] From Geoffrey de Montmorency, Governor, Punjab to Fazl-i-Husain, Member, Viceroy's Executive Council, Department of Education, Health and Lands, dated 16 April 1931, *Fazl-i-Husain Papers*, Mss. Eur. E352.

southeast, or whether the local organization went by the name of the Zamindar League or Zamindar Sabha or Kisan Sabha, as in the central districts, the basic thrust of the ideology, the activity and the demands was very similar. The Kirti Kisan Party made a brief attempt to publicize the sectarian anti-Congress line of the Comintern, but hurriedly gave it up at seeing the lack of positive response and went back to functioning within the Congress and to promoting peasant mobilization through the amorphous local-level peasant organizations.[82] It appears that the prestige of the nationalists among the people, especially after the recent hard and victorious struggle, was much too great for either the loyalists like Chhotu Ram or the leftist critics to contend with and this despite the obvious disappointment and even anger, especially among the youth, at Gandhiji's failure to secure a reprieve for Bhagat Singh.

The tone of the agitation was set by the annual conference of the Zamindar League discussed earlier, which was attended by 10,000 people in Raewind in Lahore District. Urgent remissions in government dues, the assessment of land revenue on an income tax basis and the abolition of *chahi* rates (extra charge on wells) was demanded. Sardar Mangal Singh told the audience that the recent Karachi session of the Congress had declared that the Swaraj Government would not collect revenue from those peasants who lived from hand to mouth, and added that the rule of the poor and the labourers and peasants would be established in the country. Other speakers urged the peasants to strengthen their *jathabandi* and go on *hartal* if the government refused to accept their demands. The conference also resolved to set up a Punjab Zamindar Dal—on the lines of the Akali Dal—as an agency for rural propaganda since the passing of resolutions for years had had no effect on the government.[83] A few days later, Sardar Mangal Singh issued a press statement in which he demanded, on behalf of the League, an immediate remission of 50 per cent in government dues. He argued that crops had been bad for the last six years and low prices had added to the

[82] Criticism of the Congress as a capitalist organization was voiced at the Kirti Kisan Party meeting in Amritsar on 9 April 1931 as well as in the rural areas of Jullundur in May 1931. See *The Tribune*, 12 April 1931; and FR(1) May 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/IV/1931. By the second half of May, however, the fortnightly report noted that "in more recent meetings the tendency of speakers has been, while maintaining the communistic theme, to be somewhat more accommodating to other interests and, in particular, to claim that there is no fundamental difference between themselves and the Congress, but only a divergence of view as to present policy. The Commissioner, Jullundur Division, reports that the Ghadr and Kirti-Kisan parties have now joined forces to become office holders in Congress committees and to utilize the Congress organisation to spread Kirti-Kisan propaganda." *H.P.* F. 18/IV/1931.

[83] This account of the proceedings of the Zamindar League is based on the following: FR(1) April 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/III/1931; Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 9 May 1931, *H.P.* 33/I/1931 and K.W.; *The Tribune*, 9 April 1931.

misery; peasants were paying government dues by selling their wives' ornaments and were looking to the government for relief.[84]

In Amritsar, one of the main centres of the agitation, the lead was taken by the District Zamindar Sabha, which also decided to change its name to Kisan Sabha, setting off a new trend which was subsequently picked up by other organizations. ("Zamindar" being a generic term denoting landowner and "kisan" having the more specific meaning of cultivator, the use of the term "kisan" made it possible to distinguish between rentier landlords and cultivating peasants, unlike the term "zamindar" which in Punjab applied to both.) The demand for reduction of land revenue by half and of water rates to the pre-1924 level was voiced. A reduction of railway freight rates, lowering of the exchange rate and assessment of land revenue on the same basis as income tax was also demanded. A sub-committee was formed to carry on the agitation; it was also decided to go in deputation to meet the deputy commissioner of the district, the revenue member of the Punjab Government and the personal secretary to the governor. The Amritsar Kisan Sabha continued through May to reiterate its demands and also collected signatures on a memorial demanding immediate remissions by half. The Kirti Kisan Party was also active in the district holding conferences and meetings urging the organization of workers and peasants, demanding reduction in government demand by two-thirds, abolition of *chahi* rates, withdrawal of punitive police posts from villages and release of prisoners involved in the Meerut and Lahore conspiracy cases. Some of its workers were even arrested at this stage itself.[85]

Similarly, in Sheikhupura District, where a no-revenue campaign had been averted only in the nick of time in 1930 and where the Congress was again active, in mid-May 1931 the Zamindar League (which only a couple of weeks later was to change its name to Kisan Sabha, thus indicating the change in its political complexion) had set up an enquiry committee to collect data on the capacity of the peasants to pay up land revenue and other government dues. Within a week, applications had been received from 80 villages, a considerable feat of organization. On the basis of a preliminary reading of the data, the Zamindar League demanded reduction of two-thirds in the taxes. Their argument was that the total income from one acre of land was Rs 8, whereas the combined demand or land revenue and water rates was Rs 11 and 8 annas per acre. The government was also offered the option of taking one-tenth of the produce in lieu of cash payment.[86]

In Jullundur and Hoshiarpur, the Kirti Kisan Sabha "in alliance with retired Sikh emigrants through whom it obtains some help from the Akali

[84] *The Tribune*, 1 May 1931.
[85] *The Tribune*, 24 April, 8, 10, 16, 21 May 1931.
[86] *The Tribune*, 23 May 1931.

Dal" was reported to be organizing tours, holding meetings in villages and distributing "cleverly worded pamphlets of a revolutionary type". Speeches at Kirti Kisan meetings advised the "small agriculturists to agitate for the immediate reduction of land taxation and to secure the predominance of their class in the future administration". Kirti Kisan agitation was also beginning to obtain a foothold in Gurdaspur and Sheikhupura.[87] And, as stated earlier, in Rohtak, Karnal and Hissar, Congress workers were very active in rural propaganda advocating non-payment of taxes in view of the desperate economic straits in which this traditionally drought-prone region found itself with the added burden of low prices.[88] In addition to the activity of these organizations, there were also petitions and demands by moderate local zamindar associations as well as strong appeals in the Punjab Legislative Council for remissions.[89]

Summing up the situation in the central districts towards the end of May, an official report concluded that "there are now several forces at work, the Congress trying to exert its influence by conducting enquiries into the conditions of the cultivator; the Zamindar Sabha, calling itself the Kisan Sabha and only less extreme than the Kirti–Kisan Sabha in that it repudiates communism; the Zamindar League, also advocating extreme views and a number of constitutional and semi-loyalist bodies of agriculturists, holding meetings to pass resolutions about their hard lot".[90]

Thus, it was in this context that the government declared the remissions in land revenue and water rates on 21 May 1931 and hoped that "the action of Government has seriously undermined the bases of agitation on the economic theme".[91] The remissions in land revenue were Rs 8 million and in water rates Rs 2.85 million, and applied to all types of land. They amounted to a reduction of 5 annas in a rupee (about 31 per cent) of land revenue and 3 annas in a rupee (about 19 per cent) of water rates. In the winter or *kharif* harvest of 1930, remissions of Rs 3.35 million had been given, thus bringing the total in the year 1930–31 to Rs 14.1 million. Some concessions were also given in *nazrana*, *malikana*, etc., which were paid by canal colonists. Further, district officials were asked to consider additional relief where necessary, which probably amounted to another Rs 0.5 million as indicated by the final figure of remissions of Rs 14.6 million.[92]

[87] FR(1) May 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/IV/1931.

[88] FR(1) and (2) April, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/III/1931 and 18/IV/1931.

[89] *The Tribune*, 20 May 1931; FR(2) May 1931, *H.P.* 18/IV/1931; *PLCD*, Vol. XVIII, 2 March 1931, 24 March 1931, Vol. XIX, 11 May 1931.

[90] FR(2) May 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/IV/1931.

[91] *Ibid*.

[92] *H.P.* F. 33/9/1931; *The Tribune*, 23 May 1931; FR(2) May 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/IV/1931; *The Tribune*, 9 September 1932.

Contrary to the expectations of the government, the remissions had little effect on the wave of peasant activity and organization unleashed since March. Remissions were declared inadequate by all the organizations and the agitation for further reduction continued unabated. The period immediately after the announcement, in fact, saw a significant increase in activity which was then sustained at a somewhat lower pitch till the end of the year. The Punjab Zamindar League had declared the remissions inadequate the moment they were announced and reiterated the demand for 50 per cent remission instead of the 25 per cent the government had granted.[93] The Punjab Zamindar Dal declared its intention to organize *jathas* which would tour the Sargodha and Gujarat districts for a start.[94] The Amritsar Kisan Sabha in its meeting at Bhakna demanded the complete remission of land revenue.[95] Other districts followed suit; a closer look at some of them would perhaps yield a better appreciation of the scale and style of activity.

The Zamindar League of Sheikhupura held its annual meeting on May 30 at which it changed its name to Kisan Sabha. The meeting was attended by representatives of 90 branches who elected Teja Singh Chuharkhana, a prominent nationalist of the district who had cut his teeth in the Rowlatt Satyagraha of 1919, as the president of the Sabha. They also elected a working committee. The report of the Enquiry Committee appointed a fortnight earlier, based on 400 applications from different villages, was also released and on its basis the demand for two-thirds reduction in dues was made. It was pointed out that not less than 70 per cent of the people had paid their revenue assessment for the *rabi* and *kharif* of 1930–31 by pawning ornaments, cattle or land or by borrowing from moneylenders or banks. A deputation of the Sabha also met the deputy commissioner and presented him the 400 applications they had collected; the deputy commissioner promised to do his best but urged them to pay up the present dues at any cost. The Sabha also decided to hold four big public meetings in different centres in the district within the next fortnight to enable peasants to put forward their demands. These meetings were held within the next three weeks and were largely attended with many poor peasants travelling long distances to attend. The meetings reiterated the demand for remissions and also listed other grievances such as harassment including arrests of poor kisans for payment of revenue. The Kisan Sabha also actively countered government propaganda carried out by zaildars and lambardars. It is not surprising, therefore, that in just one tehsil in Sheikhupura Rs 2.7 million of land revenue and water rates were still outstanding at the end of August and more in other tehsils.[96]

[93] *The Tribune*, 24 May 1931.
[94] *The Tribune*, 2 June 1931.
[95] *The Tribune*, 29 May 1931.
[96] *The Tribune*, 3, 4, 10, 18, 25 June, 1 September 1931.

Lyallpur District was also the centre of a sustained agitation.[97] A big conference was announced for 20 and 21 June at Lyallpur by the Zamindar League and preparations began in real earnest at the beginning of June itself. A very large number of meetings were held in villages all over the district almost every day at which the demand for more remissions and other grievances and demands were reiterated and peasants asked to come to the Lyallpur Conference in large numbers. An Enquiry Committee was set up which prepared a detailed report—what the official report termed as "a kind of revised settlement report"—within a fortnight. As a culmination of all the mobilization, the Lyallpur All-Bar Zamindar Conference was held which represented Lyallpur as well as the neighbouring districts. Sardar Mangal Singh, General Secretary of the Punjab Zamindar League, was the president. The report of the Enquiry Committee was released, which demonstrated on the basis of detailed statements of production, income and expenses that, in the current *rabi* harvest of 1931, a peasant cultivating a square of land (about 27 acres) would incur a loss of Rs 153, 10 annas after paying the government dues with the remissions.

Mangal Singh's presidential address to the conference bears citing at length since it was the most comprehensive and clear statement of all the arguments and demands that were reiterated in one form or another at the peasant meetings and conferences held during this phase. Quoting extensively from the report of the Enquiry Committee, he stated that the zamindars of Punjab were passing through hard times due to continued failure of crops for a succession of years, followed by trade depression and fall in prices. A maund of wheat which used to fetch Rs 5, now fetched only Re l, 4 annas or at most Rs 1, 6 annas. Thus, the income had been reduced to about 25 per cent of what it was earlier, but expenditure had remained the same. As a result, agriculture did not pay its way. Even after the present slump was over, the prices of wheat and cotton were not expected to rise very much. The government demand was abnormally heavy in the canal colonies and if it persisted till the next *rabi* crop, it would be impossible to pay even one-tenth of the demand. He then put forward the following immediate demands to deal with the situation caused by the Depression: (*a*) 50 per cent general remission in land revenue; (*b*) reduction of exchange rate from 1 s. 6 d. to 1 s. 4 d. (*c*) substantial reductions in railway freight rates on agricultural products to Karachi, Bombay, Calcutta; (*d*) imposition of prohibitive duty on foreign wheat and cotton goods and on all other foreign articles that could be easily produced in India with or without state aid; (*e*) substantial retrenchment in the expenditure of the government including reduction in salaries of all government servants above a certain

[97] This paragraph and the next one on the movement in Lyallpur are based on the following: *The Tribune*, 7, 13, 18, 23 June, 1931; FR(2) June 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/V/1931.

limit. He also reiterated the other continuing demands such as assessment of land revenue on income tax basis and exemption of holdings below 5 acres which, he pointed out, constituted 58 per cent of ownership holdings in the province. *Abiana*, or water rate, should be reduced to the level necessary for covering the working costs and the interest on capital and should not be levied on a commercial basis. Other grievances related to insufficient water supply in canals, *thikri pehra*, *chowkidara* tax, *kharaba* rules, the auction of crown lands and the state price of land in the village sites. The conference also decided to send a deputation to meet the governor and the government acceeded to the request for a date.

The Lahore District Zamindar Sabha also protested against the inadequate relief at a series of well-attended meetings in the district. One of these, for example, held at Suraich on 7 June, lasted the whole day and attracted an audience of 1000 men and women from villages in the Chunian and Kasur tehsils. It was addressed by Gopal Singh Quami, a prominent left-wing nationalist who was kisan secretary of the PCC, a member of the AICC, an ex-president of the Shiromani Akali Dal and a member of SGPC. He urged the peasants to unite and agitate for reduction in land revenue, to refuse to obey orders and to willingly go to jail. His speech had a strong nationalist content and was replete with references to Ajit Singh, the hero of 1907, and how he was externed. He was soon arrested and prosecuted for this speech and sentenced to one year's rigorous imprisonment.[98] Subsequent meetings of the Zamindar Sabha in Lahore District, while demanding concessions for peasants, also protested against his arrest and that of Sardar Bhola Singh, Commander, Punjab Zamindar Dal and called these arrests an attack on the peasant movement.[99]

Another district which was active and in which the foundations of the peasant movement were laid in this period was Ferozepore. Zamindar Sabha leaders and workers, among them Kirti Kisan activists, made a concerted attempt at setting up peasant organizations by holding a series of meetings in different parts of the district at which peasants were asked to come forward and form Zamindar Sabhas. Meetings were held at Rode, Kot Karur, Samalsar, Bhullar and Lopon. Sardar Mohinder Singh, President, Punjab Zamindar League, addressed the one at Samalsar and explained to the audience how the low prices of wheat were the consequence of imports from countries like Australia and Argentina and not because of Gandhi's policy of restricting imports, as made out by the government. He then urged the peasants to form *jathas*, not to pay revenue if they could not afford it, not to sell their daughters for paying the land revenue, to refuse to pay *chowkidara* tax since *chowkidars* worked for the police and the government officials, to

[98] Statement of Prosecution of Gopal Singh Quami, *H.P.* F. 27/9/1931.
[99] *The Tribune*, 10, 15 July 1931.

refuse to do *thikri pehra* (compulsory guard duty) since there was a government notification that they could be asked to do thikri pehra only if there were dacoits. At the end of his speech, he asked those who wanted to join the *jathabandi* to come forward; 30 people responded.[100]

One of the significant developments of this phase was the growth in the influence of the Kirti Kisan Sabha, despite its members having to face a number of arrests and prosecutions.[101] Their strategy was to work through the local level Kisan and Zamindar Sabhas, as confirmed by the observation made in a official report that "Zamindar or Kisan Sabhas are spreading, especially in the Central districts, and the communist Kirti-Kisan agitators seem to have abandoned their openly revolutionary and anti-capitalist preaching in favour of working through these Sabhas to cultivate a spirit of mass organisation...."[102] By November, the Punjab Kirti Kisan Sabha was so confident of its position that it issued a communique to all Kisan Sabhas (and also Mazdoor Sabhas and Kirti Kisan Parties) in Punjab, Delhi and North West Frontier Province to affiliate themselves with the Punjab Kirti Kisan Sabha and elect representatives for a conference to be held on 16 November. The government was clearly worried at this development for, as it noted:[103]

> ...until now the...Kirti Kisan Party... has attained a limited and to some extent localised footing. Zamindar or Kisan Sabhas have existed for nearly a year in many districts. They have agitated... for reduction of rural taxation. They have had no direct connection other than the overlapping of

[100] Statements of prosecutions of Bhola Singh "Sarlath" for a speech at a diwan on 9 June 1931 at Kot Karur, of Mohinder Singh, President, Punjab Zamindar League for a speech at a Zamindar Sabha meeting on 23 July 1931 at Samalsar, of Phuman Singh "Ajit" of the Kirti Kisan Party for a speech at Lopon on 2 September 1931, of Santa Singh and Gurdayal Singh of Kirti Kisan Party for speeches at a conference in Bhullar on 19–21 December 1931, *H.P.* F. 27/6/1931, 27/7/1931, 27/12/1932 and F. 27/2/1932. Ram Nath, who was one of the cadres of the Kirti Kisan Party who helped to organize the peasant movement in Ferozepore District at this time, also describes how they held four big conferences in different parts of the district. For organizing the conferences at the local level, they took the help of the heroes of the Akali Movement and for delivering the speeches they got the Ghadar Movement heroes, or Ghadri Babas, as they were affectionately called in Punjab. He himself was arrested in September 1931, and sentenced to three-and-a-half years' imprisonment. He also says that one of their major activities was to explain to the peasant that he was a *kisan* and not a zamindar. This confirms the trend we noticed earlier of the change in names from Zamindar to Kisan Sabhas (interview).

[101] One figure given was of 17 prosecutions of Kirti Kisan members between 25 April and 31 August 1931. *H.P.* F. 33/23/31.

[102] FR(1) June 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1931.

[103] Letter from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to H.W. Emerson, Home Secretary, dated 9 November 1931, *H.P.* F. 90/1932. Also see note by the Director of the Intelligence Bureau, H. Williamson, written at the end of 1932 but referring to this period, in *H.P.* F. 31/88/1932.

> certain individuals with the Kirti-Kisan Sabha. Now we have an open programme for bringing all these Zamindar and Kisan Sabhas under the control and direction of the revolutionary body.... If the combination threatened is allowed to be completed, we shall be faced with an organisation which will have much more strength than the separate limbs have now.

There is no evidence, however, that the desired affiliation actually took place, perhaps because the move was premature or because in a short while the beginning of the second wave of civil disobedience brought another wave of repression which snuffed out all political activity for some time. What is relevant, however, is that the Kirti Kisan Party was able to achieve a significant enhancement of its influence among peasants in some of the central districts of Punjab and had been able to contribute to the process of their organization and politicization.

This does not mean that it was the sole or even chief organization working among the peasantry in this period. The Congress was very much in the picture and was particularly active in the southeast where it was in fact almost the only anti-imperialist force of any consequence, the Kirti Kisans and the NJBS having a very weak presence. The Congress was also active in the central districts, particularly in Jullundur, Sheikhupura, Lahore and Lyallpur. It also gave full support to the demand for remissions at its provincial and regional level political conferences.[104] Further, it is important to remember that the left groups as well as the radical sections of the Akalis continued to function within the Congress throughout this period and therefore it is difficult to differentiate what might be called "pure" Congress influence from left or radical Akali influence, the border lines between them being extremely blurred. The impossibility of pigeon-holing individual political activists into any one slot—Akali, Congress, Kirti-Kisan, NJBS—demonstrates this aspect very clearly. Was it possible, for example, to characterize Gopal Singh Quami either as a Congressman, or as an Akali or as a left-winger? He was an ex-president of the Shiromani Akali Dal, a member of the SGPC, a member of AICC, kisan secretary of the PCC, and was one of the founders of the Kirti Kisan Party along with Sohan Singh Josh and others in April 1928. People like Sardar Mangal Singh and Amar Singh Chabbal were Akalis and Congressmen. Master Tara Singh, the prominent Akali leader, was one of the major leaders of the Civil Disobedience Movement. Principal Chhabil Das was a Congress leader as well as a member of the NJBS. This was true of ordinary activists as well. Balwant Singh,

[104] *The Tribune*, 3 April, 21, 27, 28, 29 May, 5, 17, June, 10 July, 1, 16 September, 19 December 1931; 1 and 6 January 1932; *H.P.* F. 33/I/31 and K.W. and 33/II/31; FR(2) March 1931, FR(1) and (2) April 1931, FR(1) and (2) May 1931, FR(1) and (2) June 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/II/1931, 18/III/1931, 18/IV/1931, 18/V/1931.

alias London Tor Singh, who was prosecuted for a speech at a conference at Bilga, a stronghold of the Congress, in August 1931, was described as an extremist Akali, active in Kirti Kisan Party and the Congress.[105] The examples could be multiplied. We have already seen earlier, how the Kirti Kisan Communists, despite their theoretical line, took to working within the Congress. In large part, this was a product of the open-endedness of the Congress as a mass anti-imperialist organization as well as of the fact that any genuine mass movement, whether the national movement or a peasant movement, does not have strict organisational boundaries. In any case, as far as the peasant movement was concerned, there was a basic common ground shared between the Congress, the Kirti-Kisan Party, the NJBS and the radical sections of the Akalis, both in regards to the general anti-imperialist ideological discourse as well as the specific peasant demands taken up for agitation.

Civil Disobedience: Round Two

The initiation of the second wave of Civil Disobedience on 1 January 1932 and the immediate crackdown by the government brought to an end the phase of peasant mobilization and activity facilitated by the Gandhi–Irwin "truce". The repression this time was even severer than in 1930, no time was given at all for the building up of the movement, and arrests, prosecutions and severe sentences and fines were freely resorted to. Besides, during the period of the truce as well, selective repression in the form of arrests and prosecutions of the cadre had continued, thus preventing the Congress from building up its organization in a free manner. In Rohtak, for example, where Congress activity had been particularly prominent in the rural areas, the volunteer camp set up by the Congress Seva Dal was broken up in December itself. In Sheikhupura, another stronghold, Congress leaders and workers had been harassed by false charges of non-payment of revenue. In Karnal, many faced prosecution for advocating non-payment of revenue.[106] Otherwise as well, a period of reprieve of less than an year, between March and December 1931, was probably not enough to rebuild the reserves

[105] For Gopal Singh Quami, see statement of prosecution for speech at Suraich Village in Lahore District on 7 June 1931, *H.P.* F. 27/9/1931. For Balwant Singh alias London Singh, see statement of prosecution for speeches at Bilga Village in Jullundur District on 12 and 14 August 1931, *H.P.* F. 27/7/1931. The others are too well-known to require any reference.

[106] For repression against the Congress during the period of the truce, see, for example, *H.P.* F. 33/23/31, 27/6/1931, 27/7/31, 27/8/31, 27/9/1931, 27/1/1932, 27/2/1932, 27/12/1932, 33/1/31 and K.W. 33/II/31; *The Tribune*, 27, 28 May, 5 June, 16 September 1931, 1 January 1932; FR(1) May 1931, FR(1) and (2) June 1931, *H.P.* F. 18/IV/1931, 18/V/1931; FR(1) January 1932, *H.P.* F. 18/I/1932.

necessary for the next round of struggle. The disastrous economic situation contributed its own mite to the depletion of reserves; it was not easy for activists to contemplate long periods in prison nor for villages to shell out huge amounts in fines and punitive police charges when there was not enough even for keeping the revenue collector at bay—and the government lost no time in making it clear that long sentences and heavy financial penalties were very much on the cards.[107]

In this context, it is hardly surprising that attempts at resistance could not be sustained for long. Despite repression, there were attempts at protest in the districts of Rohtak, Karnal, Jullundur, Lahore, Amritsar and Lyallpur in January 1932. In early February, there was a slight increase in activity in the rural areas which was countered by firm measures including the declaration of Congress committees as unlawful organizations. After this, despite the Shiromani Akali Dal bowing to extremist pressure within its own ranks and according permission to members to join the Civil Disobedience Movement in their individual capacity and the Ahrars also pledging support, there were only "spasmodic bursts of energy at a few centres" and "desultory attempts at picketing in a few districts". These, too, were met with firm action, and died down completely by the middle of March; the quiet lasted for two months.[108]

In mid-May, the return from jail of some of the "more incorrigible Congressmen" and the prospect of the expiry of the repressive ordinances acted as a spur to the revival of political activity. A District Congress Conference held at Hoshiarpur on 29 May attracted an audience of 900 people and was followed by an attempt at mass picketing which resulted in 13 arrests. Preparations were set afoot for a political conference in Amritsar on 4 June. A considerable amount of publicity literature advertising this conference was discovered by the government.[109]

In addition to the attempt at the revival of general political activity, there was a concerted move to initiate a campaign of non-payment of land revenue. The government was first alerted to the possibility of a no-revenue campaign by its recovery towards the end of May of 900 copies of "an obnoxious Gurmukhi pamphlet" advertising the non-payment of land revenue. The pamphlet had apparently already been fairly widely distributed.[110]

[107] See, for example, FR(1) and (2) January 1932, *H.P.* F. 18/I/1932; *H.P.* F. 13/14/1932 and K.W., 27/III/1932, 27/II/1932.

[108] FR(1) and (2) January, FR(1) and (2) February, FR(1) and (2) March, FR(1) and (2) April, FR(1) May 1932, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1932, 18/4/1932, 18/5/1932, 18/7/1932, 18/8/1932.

[109] FR(2) May 1932, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1932.

[110] *Ibid*. The pamphlet, titled "*Mamla na den da Morcha*" (A movement for non-payment of revenue), proscribed by the government on 20 May 1932, extracts from which are given in the files, shows the kind of propaganda being undertaken at the grass-roots level. The pamphlet gave the whole history of movements of non-payment of revenue such as in Bardoli,

Open political activity to promote the campaign soon surfaced in the rural areas of Lahore District, followed by Lyallpur. In Lahore, the initiative was taken by the Congress and, to a lesser extent, the Zamindar Sabha. There were reports of posters and Congress bulletins appearing in the villages which exhorted peasants to refuse payment. Some meetings were also successfully held at which speakers, in one case three women, exhorted peasants to refuse to pay land revenue.[111] Given the poor harvests, the continuing low prices, the meagre remissions, and the consequent inability of peasants, acknowledged by government, to pay up their dues, only the knowledge of the severe repercussions prevented them from following these exhortations. In Lyallpur, for example, all the residents of village Sathiala, Chak No. 50, decided to follow the resolution passed by the Punjab Zamindara Conference at Lyallpur on 7 July 1932 before an audience of 2,000 that peasants should pay only 50 per cent of the revenue. They told the *tehsildar* to take 50 per cent and remit the rest; as a result, seven of them were promptly arrested.[112]

Given this "firmness" on the part of the authorities in the face of the continued misery of the peasants, there is more than a touch of irony in the note of surprise discernible in the comment of the official report that "collections are, however, coming in satisfactorily in most districts..., this notwithstanding that in the Jhelum and Rawalpindi districts fifty candidates for enlistment appear for every vacancy that occurs in the Police, and many of these candidates are badly nourished, which is an unhappy indication that the effects of economic depression are being severely felt in rural areas".[113]

The effects of the economic depression were of course there and would remain but the political depression that had set in with the crushing of the Civil Disobedience Movement increased the pall of gloom. Till almost the middle of 1933, there was hardly any protest visible of any kind and the only political activity in the province was around the Communal Award and associated developments, which on the whole left the peasantry untouched.[114] The gains of the struggle during the period spanned by the two Civil Disobedience movements would become visible only when the chains

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the UP, in 1907 in Punjab and how they led to concessions. At the moment, it argued, there was no answer but non-payment of land revenue, because prices were low and were not going any higher. Kirtis and kisans worked the whole day to fill the pockets of the "Goras"—the white men. Gandhi had started a non-violent war for the sake of the Kirtis, especially the peasants. They should join it and refuse to pay revenue, etc. *H.P.* F. 149/1932.

[111] FR(1) June 1932, FR(l) July 1932, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1932 and 18/10/1932; *The Tribune*, 23 May and 4 July 1932.

[112] FR(1) July 1932, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1932; *The Tribune*, 9, 11, 21 July 1932.

[113] FR(1) July 1932, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1932.

[114] See FRS for this period.

of repression would begin to loosen and a freer and fresher political wind would blow across the land. A considerable advance had been made at the organizational level, despite the fact that a unified provincial level organization was still to come. Local-level organizations had sprouted up in a number of districts and some of these had achieved considerable mobilization at the grassroots-level, even though continuous repression made it difficult to attain any continuity in this aspect. A process of radicalization had also been unleashed and the influence of loyalist-constitutionalist organizations considerably checked. Most of those who worked among the peasants shared a common ground in a radical nationalist ideological framework and a firm commitment to the organization and mobilization of the peasants with the objective of protecting and furthering their economic interests and ensuring their fuller participation in the ongoing political processes. The economic depression had hit the peasants hard—all sections of them—and the political workers had rallied to the occasion and assisted in the focusing and organization of the protest, which was in no small way responsible for whatever concessions were wrung out of an unsympathetic bureaucracy.

The Civil Disobedience Movement, with its emphasis on the defiance of the laws and authority of the state, had undoubtedly furthered and strengthened the process of the building up of self-confidence, dignity and capacity to resist oppression that had been initiated and advanced by earlier mass anti-imperialist movements. That poor villagers could refuse to give free supplies to the police and refuse to perform *begar* and prefer to get beaten up rather than submit was unthinkable and unheard of a few years earlier. The cool determination with which the Congress volunteers offered arrest and accepted beatings, the careless abandon with which the youth of the NJBS challenged the state and even laid down their lives, the tireless consistency with which Ghadrite–Kirtis who had abandoned the charms of the West for the sake of their motherland propagated the message of *mazdoor-kasan raj* despite continuous interruption by detentions, internments and confiscations, could not but help to straighten the backs that had been kept bent for long with hard toil, servility and fear.

FOUR

Consolidating Peasant Politics: National Organization and Ideological Radicalization, 1933–37

Slowly and hesitantly, like a convalescent putting a tentative foot forward, political workers began from around mid-1933 the familiar task of slowly pieceing together the shattered bits of the organizational frame that had been ruthlessly dismantled by the heavy blows of repression. With Civil Disobedience having, for all practical purposes, come to an end,[1] the government was now willing to turn a more lenient eye towards political organization and activity—till it again reached "dangerous" levels. As in 1931, when the Gandhi–Irwin Truce had signalled a period of intense agrarian agitation, the undeclared truce following the collapse of the second phase of Civil Disobedience brought with it a fresh new breeze that fanned into flame the smouldering embers of peasant resistance. The failure of agricultural prices to recover from the depths to which they had been pushed by the World Economic Depression more than three years ago had ensured that discontent continued to lurk just beneath the surface, waiting only for a suitable context for expression.

Agitation Around Land Revenue: Lyallpur, 1933–35

Unsurprisingly, Lyallpur was the first district in which the signs of peasant activity appeared. As the premier canal colony district, its agricultural economy had been sucked the deepest into the vortex of commercialization and therefore suffered the most from the effects of the Depression. Simultaneously, the majority of its inhabitants were settlers from the

[1] This is evident from all reports. However, for confirmation one can refer to *H.P.* F. 3/1/1933, which contains weekly telegraphic reports on the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1933.

central districts and had been deeply involved in the process of politicization that had been underway since at least the beginning of the century. Lyallpur colonists had contributed their might to the 1907 agitation, the Akali Movement, and to the Non-Cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements. In 1931 it was one of the chief centres of the agitation for remission of government dues. In July 1932, when most other areas were quiet, we noted that Lyallpur had continued to agitate for reduction in land revenue.[2]

And now again, in April 1933, we find an agitation building up, the timing being most likely dictated by the approaching land revenue demand for the *rabi* or wheat harvest. The main demand was for reduction in the land revenue, the ground offered being that the recent increase in prices came after the wheat had been sold and at a time when peasants were buying their food and seed. In addition, the rains had failed and canals had not supplied enough water. Sugar cane prices were low, there was a scarcity of fodder and the cotton crop had been attacked by boll-worms. In short, a good case existed for the government foregoing a part of its exactions.[3]

Apart from the securing of a remission in the current demand, Lyallpur peasants were also worried about the recently announced resettlement of the district. Representative bodies of peasants were quick to express their views on how the settlement should be conducted; and their statements reveal interesting contemporary perceptions of the system of land revenue assessment. For example, Sardar Mangal Singh, the president of the Lyallpur Zamindara Conference, held in mid-April 1933, issued a press statement in which he demanded that in the new assessment the prices of only the last five years—and not of 10 as was the usual practice—be taken into account as prices were not likely in the future to reach the high levels they had reached earlier. Further, he wanted only harvest prices to be taken as the basis and not the prices of the whole year, as the peasants sold their produce at harvest time when the buying companies operated as a cartel to keep the prices low.[4] Intervening in this public debate, the financial secretary of the Zamindar League advised that the number of years be reduced further, from five to three, as only these last three years were representative years. He added that only 10 per cent of net assets be taken as land revenue, and not 25 per cent as laid down in the Land Revenue Act, and the size of the holding, the wealth or indebtedness of the owner and increased expenses on cattle, etc., should all be considered when fixing the

[2] See Chapter 3, this volume. For a detailed discussion of the impact of the Depression, see my *Colonializing Agriculture*: *The Myth of Punjab Exceptionalism*, New Delhi (forthcoming), Chapter 3, Section IV.

[3] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 5, 17 and 19 April for a letter to the Editor from the Secretary of the Zamindara League, Lyallpur and for reports of a Zamindar Conference in Samundari presided over by Sardar Mangal Singh, addressed by Sardar Sampuran Singh, MLC, and attended by over 5,000 Sikh and Muslim zamindars.

[4] *The Tribune*, 20 April 1933.

pitch of demand.[5] Yet others demanded that the principles of income tax be applied to the re-settlement of the district.[6] Indeed, the advice to the government on how to conduct the new settlement was in essence a multi-pronged critique of the whole existing system of land revenue assessment and collection.

It is necessary at this stage to make a slight detour and point out the role that was played by a unique individual, Professor Brij Narain, in the development and popularization of the whole critique of the agrarian system in Punjab—a critique which was incorporated into the practical understanding of the movement. This is the right place to make the detour because Professor Brij Narain played more than an intellectual role in the Lyallpur resettlement agitation—he participated in the conferences, wrote about the movement in the press and identified himself totally with its objectives.[7]

Professor Brij Narain was a teacher of economics at the Sanatana Dharma College, Lahore, who wrote a number of books on Indian economic problems.[8] But besides being a serious student in general of Indian economic affairs, he devoted specialized attention to the problems of Punjab agriculture. With the coming of the Depression, his interest in this field assumed a more political aspect and he wrote regularly in the daily press pointing out the terrible distress of the peasants—but always based his conclusions on detailed statistics. Some of the most potent myths about Punjab agriculture were questioned by him. For example, that land revenue demand in Punjab was very light, that the system worked in favour of the peasant proprietor, that no tenant problem existed in the province, etc.[9] He wrote in the daily press, brought out pamphlets in the vernacular, spoke incessantly at

[5] *Ibid.*, 1 June 1933.

[6] *Ibid.*, 7 October 1933, contains the report of a big public meeting held in Chak No. 62 G.B. in connection with the coming settlement. It was addressed by Giani Kartar Singh, Jathedar Moola Singh and Ch. Ahmad Hasan. Resolutions demanding payment of land revenue in kind and immediate remission in land revenue and water rate by 66 per cent were also passed.

[7] See, for example, his articles on the Lyallpur agitation in *The Tribune*, 20 July, 2 August, 4 and 6 October 1935. The government also noted that "Professor Brij Narain took a prominent part". See FR(2) July 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1935.

[8] Among his important publications are *India Before and Since the Crisis, Volume I and II*, Allahabad, 1939; *Indian Socialism*, Lahore, 1937; *Eighty Years of Punjab Food Prices, 1841–1920*, Board of Economic Inquiry, Punjab, Lahore.

[9] See, for example, his article on "Agricultural Income in the Punjab", in *The Tribune*, 28 December 1932, in which he discusses at length Kartar Singh's *Farm Accounts in the Punjab, 1930–31*, to show how Depression hits the tenants hardest; his article in *The Tribune*, 7 June 1934, in which he uses the reports of the Cooperative Societies to show how large a proportion of loans in particular districts was being taken to pay the land revenue, especially in recent years, that is, because of the Depression; his article in *The Tribune*, 16 March 1935, criticizing Chhotu Ram for refusing to recognize the distinction between landlords and peasants in Punjab. He cited figures to show that the landlords in Punjab cultivated a large proportion of the land, etc.

public conferences and meetings, conducted innumerable "Kisan Workers' Training Schools" where he always spoke on the economic problems facing the peasantry. In his political outlook, he was a nationalist and a socialist, though he did not identify exclusively with any specific communist or socialist group in Punjab, but was willing to assist all in their work among the peasants. And since we may not have occasion to focus exclusively on him again, let us take his story to its poignant conclusion: so closely had his fate become intertwined with that of the province for which he lived and worked that the tragedy that rent it into two struck him down as well. He was killed trying to reason with a communal mob in 1947 in Lahore.

However, to return to the story of Lyallpur and the debate around its resettlement: beginning around the middle of 1933 when the process of reassessment was announced and continuing through 1934 at a steady pace, it came to a head by the middle of 1935 when the settlement reports of different tehsils began to get ready and the essential features of the proposed settlement came to be known.[10] By then, the agitation was being conducted by a formally-constituted Bandobast or Settlement Committee.[11] The Zamindar League of Lyallpur was also very active.[12] The composition of the activists appears to have been fairly broad-based, as there are references to many socialists and "kisan" workers as well as to more moderate members of the Punjab Legislative Assembly and to well-known Akali leaders. The mobilization also appears to have cut across lines of religion, as there are sufficient indications to show that both Sikhs and Muslims—there being very few Hindu peasants—were participants in the protest.[13]

While the agitation to ensure that resettlement did not mean any enhancement in the old rates and to secure the acceptance of some changes in the method of assessment had been continuing since 1933, it took a new turn in 1935 when it was learnt that the settlement was to be based on a new system of what was called the "sliding scale". The essential feature of this system was that land revenue was not fixed but fluctuated with the level of prices. However, as Professor Brij Narain was quick to point out

[10] For information on the agitation from mid-1933 to mid-1935, see *The Tribune*, 5, 17, 19, 20 April, 1 June and 7 October 1933, 4 March, 5 May, 5 August, and 31 August 1934, 20 May, 1 June, 20 July, 29 July, 30 August, 6, 12, 23, and 30 September, 3, 4, 6 and 12 October 1935, 19 February 1936; FR(1) December 1933, FR(1) March 1934, FR(2) June 1934, FR(1) and (2) July 1934, FR(2) July 1935, FR(1) October 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/14/1933; 18/3/1934, 18/6/1934, 18/7/1934, 18/7/1935 and 18/10/1935; *PLCD*, Vol. XXIV, 27 February and 1 March 1934.

[11] The earliest references to the Lyallpur Bandobast or Settlement Committee are found in FR(1) March 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1934.

[12] See *The Tribune*, 5 April, 1 June 1933, 4 March 1934, 30 September, 3 and 6 October 1935; FR(2) July 1935, FR(1) October 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1935, 18/10/1935.

[13] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 17 and 19 April, 1 June, 7 October 1933, 5 August 1934, 20 May, 1 June, 20, 29 July, 30 September, 3, 4, 6 October 1935.

and the agitators never tired of repeating, the scale had been so designed, the maximum prices and maximum rates of revenue, from which the downward slide would occur, had been fixed in such a manner that even after the downward revision was made to take into account actual prices, the real revenue demand still worked out at many points to be higher than it would at current rates. Besides, every year the government could, with great benevolence, announce "remissions", while all it would in reality be doing was announcing the actual revenue demand for the year according to the sliding scale.[14]

Thus, from June to October 1935, the agitation in Lyallpur was conducted at a vigorous pace, with signature campaigns,[15] statements to and articles in the Press,[16] a very large number of meetings in villages, followed by two big conferences, one in Toba Tek Singh and the other in Lyallpur.[17] *The Tribune* carried extensive reports, including many written by Professor Brij Narain himself, who in this case took on the role not only of intellectual adviser but propagandist and reporter as well. Pamphlets in Urdu written by him titled "Mam'la-i-Zamin aur jadid tariqa-i-tashkhis" and "Maliana aur *Abiana*", which explained the new method of land revenue assessment as well as the problems with the water rates, were freely distributed in the district.[18] Interestingly, both the big conferences were chaired by Muslim members of the Legislative Assembly, an obvious attempt to attract Muslim peasants, and one that appears to have succeeded.[19]

The mixed composition of the leadership of the agitation led to some tension as well, as on the occasion of the second big kisan conference at

[14] For criticism of the new principles of assessment, see *The Tribune*, 20, 29 July, 12 and 23 September, 3, 4, 6 October 1935, and 9 February 1936.

[15] A petition signed by several thousand peasants of Lyallpur District was sent to the government. *The Tribune*, 20 July 1935.

[16] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 20 July, 2 August, 12 and 23 September, 4 and 6 October 1935.

[17] In preparation for the Kisan Conference held at Toba Tek Singh at the end of July, village meetings had started since the beginning of June. Brij Narain and Munshi Ahmad Din, a prominent Socialist leader and orator, participated in many of these. There are specific reports of a meeting in Toba Tek Singh on 7 July and at Kirari, a predominantly Muslim village in Lyallpur District, on 14 July, at which a demand was made that the Settlement Officer should come and explain the new principles of assessment personally at the Kisan Conference at Toba Tek Singh from 26–28 July. See *The Tribune*, 1 June, 20, 29 July, and 2 August 1935; FR(2) July 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1935. For the Lyallpur Kisan Conference, held from 27–29 September, mobilization began in August itself. By end of August, 15 meetings had been held in one tehsil alone—Jaranwala—and more were going on in Lyallpur Tehsil. A report of 6 September mentioned 25 meetings already held. In between, statements to the press were issued. The Conference itself attracted 6,000 peasants on the first day. See *The Tribune*, 30 August, 6, 12, 23, 30 September, 3, 4, 6 October 1935; FR(1) October 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1935.

[18] *The Tribune*, 20 July, 2 August, 4 and 6 October 1935.

[19] The first one at Toba Tek Singh was presided over by Rana Ferozedin, and the second one at Lyallpur by Pir Fazal Hussain, *The Tribune*, 29 July, 30 September, and 3 October 1935.

Lyallpur, when the President, Pir Fazal Hussain, refused to allow the socialist workers to speak, despite an earlier assurance from the organizers.[20] It is possible that while the more moderate elements at the local level in the Zamindar League had found the socialists very useful in the mobilization effort and had therefore assured them of representation at the conference, the president, being an outsider, had merely expressed the general hostility of the pro-Unionist moderate elements towards the Socialists. The government, too, seemed to be following a policy of singling out the socialist elements among the Lyallpur political activists for arrests and prosecutions while leaving the moderates untouched.[21]

This, of course, was in keeping with the general stance of the Punjab administration at this time towards left-wing activists. In September 1934 itself, all left-wing organizations, or organizations suspected of left-wing connections, had been banned. But to place that event in its context, we will now have to leave Lyallpur and return to mid-1933 and pick up the threads of the rest of the story.

Consolidation of the Left and Government Repression: 1933–34

One of the first indications that left-wing groups were in the process of reorganization and revival of political activity was in late June 1933 when Karam Singh Mann[22] called a meeting of left-wing workers at Bradlaugh Hall at Lahore and it was decided to meet again at Amritsar at Diwali and meanwhile to carry on rural propaganda in the name of the Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha.[23] Meanwhile, reports of the Kirti Kisan Party's activities

[20] *The Tribune*, 30 September, 3 and 4 October 1935, FR(1) October 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1935.

[21] See *The Tribune*, 6 and 12 October 1935. Munshi Ahmad Din, the Socialist leader who had taken a prominent part in the agitation, was arrested before the Lyallpur Conference, and a resolution protesting his arrest was passed. *The Tribune*, 30 September and 3 October 1935. He was prosecuted for the speech he delivered at Lyallpur on 26 July in which he talked about the purse offered to General Dyer in appreciation of his services at Jallianwala Bagh. He was sentenced to two years and six months' rigorous imprisonment, and a fine of Rs 100 or, in default of payment of fine, another 6 months' rigorous imprisonment. *H.P.* F. 36/2/1936.

[22] Karam Singh Mann was a London-trained barrister whose "conversion" to communism had occurred in England at the hands of the well-known communist leader Saklatvala. He returned to India in 1932 when, according to his testimony, there was no unified communist movement in India. Only separate groups such as Dange group, Ranadive group, Madras group, etc., existed. There was also a "London" group, of which he was a part, which consisted of those who had become Communists in London, was spread over many provinces, and existed till 1935 or 1936, when P.C. Joshi finally unified the groups and formed the Party (interview).

[23] FR(1) July 1933; *H.P.* F.18/8/1933. According to the government report, three separate meetings were held on the same day, one to form a labour party in the Punjab, and the other two under the aegis of the NJBS and the Mazdur Kisan Sabha. *Ibid.*

among the peasants began to come in. In July, a Kirti Kisan League was formed in the Doaba wiCth headquarters at Hoshiarpur and by September it was reported to have four branches. The Kirti Kisan Sabha also held a conference at the annual *Chhappar* fair in the district on 3 and 4 September where "there was, as usual, some objectionable speaking, but on the whole the standard of vituperation against government and capitalists was lower than has been the case on previous occasions at this annual fair". Similarly, in Amritsar, the Kirti Kisan Sabha held a meeting at the *Amawas* fair at Tarn Taran in August, and got an audience of over a thousand.[24] By October, the government was already issuing orders restricting four leading members of the Ghadar/Kirti Kisan Parties to their villages under the Punjab Criminal Law (Amendment) Act.[25]

In November 1933, two prominent Communist leaders of the province, Sohan Singh Josh and Abdul Majid, who had been serving their terms in the Meerut Conspiracy Case, were released.[26] Josh, who had earlier been a leading organizer of the Communist movement in Punjab and active in the

[24] FR(1) July 1933, FR(2) August 1933, FR(1) September 1933, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1933, 18/9/1933, 18/10/1933; *The Tribune*, 7 October 1933.

[25] FR(2) October 1933, *H.P.* F. 18/12/1933. By notification of 28 October 1933, Sections 2, 3, 4, and 5 of the Punjab Criminal Law Amendment Act of 1932 were brought into force in Jullundur "in order to legalise the issue of restraint orders to certain members of a committee of 11 disaffected Sikhs deputed to foment Kirti Kisan propaganda in the districts of Amritsar, Jullundur, etc." Confidential No. 16712-S.B. from F.H. Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated Lahore, 11 November 1933, *H.P.* F. 11/12/1933. The reference in the notification cited above is most likely to the Moscow-trained Ghadar Party activists who had just arrived in India. Bhagat Singh Bilga recounts how the Ghadar Party gave the second call for return to India in 1930–32. And 70 per cent of those who responded were, like himself, from Argentina. They came to India via Moscow, receiving political training there at the hands of Bolsheviks (interview). They came in batches, and the reference in October 1933 is obviously to one of the first of these new batches who were returning to India. In fact, the Director of the Intelligence Bureau wrote a note in November 1933 in which he said that if it was not for this batch of "Soviet agents" that had just arrived last month, he would be in favour of releasing the six state prisoners—Ghulam Mohammed, Fazl Ilahi, Abdul Waris, Harjap Singh, Ehsan Elahi, Karam Singh—arrested in 1930 on "the Bolshevik-cum-Communist-cum-tinge of terrorist ticket", because there was no danger now as in 1930. But he did not want them to establish contacts with these Soviet agents, therefore he was in favour of postponing their release. See Note by D.I.B., H.W. Williamson, dated 9 September 1933, *H.P.* F. 44/92/1933. Incidentally, Fazl Ilahi and Abdul Waris were released on 20 March 1934 since the leader, Harjap Singh, had weakened and given a statement. Initially, only those two were released in order to watch the effect of their release, and then decide on the release of the others, *H.P.* F. 44/70/1933.

[26] The Meerut Conspiracy Case lasted from 1929 to 1933. In August of 1933, the Allahabad High Court delivered its judgement, giving S.S. Josh and Majid one year's rigorous imprisonment each, but as they had already completed the required period, they were set free in November 1933. *Communists Challenge Imperialism from the Dock: The Meerut Conspiracy Case 1929–1933*, with an Introduction by Muzaffar Ahmad, Calcutta, 1967, p. xiv.

NJBS and the *Kirti* paper and Kirti group,[27] had now emerged as a protagonist of the Communist Party of India (CPI). On his release, he set about organizing the left forces of the province behind the CPI, but since this could not be done openly in the name of the CPI since it was banned, he founded the Anti-Imperialist League, which became simply another name for the CPI group of Communists. This process he completed by April 1934 when at a meeting in Amritsar the office-bearers of the Anti-Imperialist League were elected.[28] He then tried to bring together various individuals and groups and organizations including kisan organizations within the ambit of the Anti-Imperialist League.[29]

Simultaneously, the NJBS and the Kirti Kisan Party, the other two major left groups, were trying to sort out their differences and form a combination and also to bring other existing groups into their sphere of influence, and to revive left-wing activity in different parts of the province. In the summer of 1934, in the months of June and July, they combined to send a deputation to tour the province.[30] Their object, in the words of a government document, was to study "the economic and political conditions of each district, to acquaint themselves with local grievances, should these exist, and also to unite the scattered forces of district organisations subordinate to the Sabha and the Kirti Kisan Party". Not to be left behind, "the Anti-Imperialist League, which also hoped eventually to secure the control of all Communist activity in the province, despatched a similar deputation in order to consolidate its own position in various important centres".[31] The latter, however, ran out of funds and had to abandon its plans halfway.[32] The former completed its tour, and though it was not too successful in strengthening its organization, it did a careful job of studying the situation and of making suggestions for the revival of activities. It is another

[27] See Chapter 2, this volume.

[28] See FR(1) December 1933, FR(1) January 1934, FR(2) April 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/14/1933, 18/1/1934, 18/4/1934. Harkishen Singh Surjeet described how Sohan Singh Josh called a meeting of 18–20 people in a corner of the Jallianwala Bagh in 1934 (the reference is probably to the meeting on 15 April 1934) and formed the Communist Party. Obviously, though for public consumption the organization was named the Anti-Imperialist League, for the members it was the Communist Party (interview).

[29] FR(1) January 1934, FR(1) July 1934, FR(1) August 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1934, 18/7/1934, 18/8/1934. Also see letter from the Government of Punjab to the Under Secretary of State for India, London, No. 12967-34-9(3)-S.B. dated Simla E, 17 September 1934, *H.P.* F. 7/20/1934 and K.W.

[30] See FR(1) July 1933, FR(2) August 1933, FR(1) December 1933, FR(1) January 1934, FR(1) February 1934, FR(2) March 1934, FR(1) and (2) April 1934, FR(1) and (2) June 1934, FR(1) July 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1933, 18/9/1933, 18/14/1933, 18/1/1934, 18/2/1934; 18/3/1934, 18/4/1934, 18/6/1934, 18/7/1934. Also *H.P.* F. 7/20/1934 and K.W.

[31] Letter from the Government of Punjab to the Under Secretary of State for India, London, No. 12967-34-9(3)-S.B. dated Simla E, 17 September 1934. *H.P.* F. 7/20/1934 and K.W.

[32] FR(1) July 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1934.

matter that the government thought that the "ambitious" programme outlined in the report would be "used to the best effect to extract money from the Third International".[33]

Along with the process of expansion and revamping of the organizational set-up, the left groups had also, since the beginning of the year, further stepped up the activity among the peasantry. Their activity, in the forms of meetings and conferences, was particularly visible in the districts of Amritsar, Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur, and to a lesser extent in Lahore, Ludhiana and Sheikhupura. Apart from Lyallpur, which we have discussed separately earlier, it was the district of Amritsar that became the centre of a concerted campaign during this period.[34] The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha, which was run by the Punjab Kirti Kisan Sabha, had already conducted two propaganda tours through the villages, holding 14 meetings in 14 different villages on 14 successive days, and had published the programme of the third tour, when it was banned on 10 September 1934.[35] At these meetings, its activists "sought to exploit the present depression among the peasants by cleverly combining the expression of legitimate grievances with the propagation of Communist doctrines".[36] Kisan Sabha workers also spoke at gatherings organized by other parties and groups, especially the Akalis who were quite active among peasants at this time.[37] The Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur districts were the venues of important kisan conferences in this period, to which important provincial leaders were invited. Mobilization also occurred through smaller village level meetings. Attempts at mobilization extended to Ludhiana.[38]

[33] FR(2) July 1934, *H.P.* F.18/7/1934.

[34] For political activity among peasants in Amritsar, see *The Tribune*, 7 October and 2 November 1933, 5 and 20 February, 11 March, 9 April, 25 July and 17 August 1934; and FR(2) August 1933, FR(2) October 1933, FR(2) May 1934, FR(1) and (2) June 1934, FR(1) August 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1933 and 18/12/1933, 18/5/1934, 18/6/1934 and 18/8/1934; and *H.P.* F. 7/20/1934 and K.W.

[35] Letter from the Government of Punjab to the Under Secretary of State for India, London, No. 12467-34-9(3)-S.B. dated Simla E, 17 September 1934, *H.P.* F. 7/20/1934 and K.W. In this letter, the Punjab Government, informing the Home Government of the reasons for declaring unlawful the various Communist bodies, particularly singled out the Amritsar Kirti Kisan Sabha as being "the most active". It also informed the Home Government that "so dangerous were these activities that Government was compelled to restrict the movements of many of the workers by action under the Punjab Criminal Law (Amendment) Act." *Ibid*. For repression against Amritsar activists, see FR(2) June 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1934.

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 7 October 1933, 20 February, 11 March and 9 April 1934.

[38] In Gurdaspur, for example, in March 1934, the District Kisan Sabha held a meeting at Dera Baba Nanak, while Kirti Kisan Workers voiced the grievances of peasants at many Akali meetings. In July, a Kisan Conference was held at Mouza Khushipur, and a kisan worker was restrained at the same time. Another conference was held at Shahpur in the same month, at which Karam Singh Mann and other leaders were present. At the end of August, a District Kisan Conference was held at Dhariwal at which Communists dominated. See *The Tribune*, 9

In Lahore, as in Lyallpur, left-wing activists were not in a dominating position among the peasants, the leadership being more mixed in its ideological composition. In February and March, two big conferences were held, the first one being dominated by Master Tara Singh and the second one drawing together people as far apart as Chaudhary Chhotu Ram, Gopal Singh Quami (a left-winger), and Sardar Pratap Singh (a nationalist Akali).[39] In Sheikhupura, the Zamindar League, the Congress as well as left-wing activists were busy mobilizing the peasants.[40]

The one common demand in all the districts, irrespective of the political affiliation of the groups that were in the leadership, was for reduction in the government's appropriation of surplus via land revenue and water rates. Almost everyone wanted at least a 50 per cent reduction immediately, as the effects of the Depression had far from worn off. In addition, as in Amritsar, there was an attempt to ensure that future settlements of land revenue would be lenient and assessment made on the same basis as income tax. The demand for abolition of all kinds of extra cesses, which were collected as additional charges on the land revenue, such as *malba, chowkidara, panchotra* and *chahi* rates, was also gathering force. In addition, at gatherings organized by the left-wing groups, demands for the release of political prisoners undergoing imprisonment in the Ghadar Conspiracy Cases of 1914–15 as well as of those detained without trial as state prisoners for a long time were voiced.[41]

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and 11 July and 11 August 1934, and FR(1) March 1934, FR(2) May 1934, FR(1) July 1934, FR(2) August 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1934, 18/5/1934, 18/7/1934, 18/8/1934.

Similarly, in Hoshiarpur, apart from the activity already described earlier, a District Mazdur Kisan Conference was held at Tanda Umar on 1 June 1934 at which the proceedings were described as very much like those of the Amritsar Kisan Sabha's, that is, Communistic in nature, and more kisan conferences on Communistic lines were reported in July 1934. FR(1) June 1934, FR(1) July 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1934 and 18/7/1934. In Ludhiana, the Kirti Kisan Party held a district conference at village Sahnewal in May 1934 but in September 1934 had to abandon its planned meetings because of local hostility. See *The Tribune*, 18 February 1934, and FR(1) September 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1934.

[39] For these and other meetings in Lahore District in this period, see FR(1) December 1933, FR(1) February 1934, FR(1) July 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/14/1933, 18/2/1934 and 18/7/1934, and *The Tribune*, 24 March 1934. The first of the two conferences mentioned earlier was held at Kot Radha Kishen, from 6–9 February 1934, and the second at Luliani in the third week of March for three days.

[40] See FR(1) November 1933, FR(1) March 1934, FR(2) June 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/13/1933, 18/3/1934, 18/6/1934. In September 1933, the government had extended Section 7 of Punjab Criminal Law Amendment Act to Sheikhupura because of revival of picketing by the Congress. Confidential No. 16712-SHK-S.B., from C.C. Garbett, Chief Secretary, Punjab to the Home Secretary, Government of India, dated Simla E., 11 September 1933, *H.P.* F. 11/12/1933.

[41] This paragraph is based on the reports of all the activity mentioned earlier above and the references have already been given.

Thus, "rural agitation on Communist lines", as the government called it, was beginning to establish itself in central Punjab by the middle of 1934.[42] The process of organizational consolidation of the left-wing groups was also proceeding apace. Their intention of bringing under their guidance and control the district-level organizations working among the peasants and to extend them to other areas was also clear.[43] In other words, it seemed that a united provincial-level organization under left control might emerge in the near future. To nip this possibility in the bud, as well as in accordance with the policy of the Government of India enunciated since July of declaring unlawful all communist organizations in the country, the Punjab Government issued a notification on 10 September 1934 declaring unlawful the following five associations:

(*a*) The Anti-Imperialist League, Punjab, its committees, sub-committees and branches.
(*b*) The Punjab Provincial Nau Jawan Bharat Sabha, Lahore, its committees, sub-committees and branches.
(*c*) The Punjab Kirti-Kisan Party, Amritsar, its committees, sub-committees and branches.
(*d*) The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha.
(*e*) The Punjab Kisan League.

The notification was followed by searches in the principal offices of each body, as well as of the houses and shops of its prominent members in different cities where papers and literature were seized. No arrests were effected, and the organizations notified immediately dissolved themselves.[44]

Focus on Debt: *Karza* Committees, 1934–35

As a consequence of the ban, the Communists and Socialists now appeared in new incarnations. Sikh Communists had the advantage of being able to continue work through the various Sikh organizations, an opportunity they fully used, especially in Amritsar and Jullundur. The Congress Socialist

[42] FR(1) July 1934, *H.P.* 18/7/1934. This report also referred to "the many Zamindar or Kisan Sabhas which have recently sprung up in the Central Punjab".
[43] For example, the Anti-Imperialist League had decided at a meeting in Amritsar on 12 July 1934 to form a Kisan League "with a view to securing control over the many Zamindar or Kisan Sabhas which have recently sprung up in the Central Punjab". *Ibid*. The Kirtis were already active on the peasant front for the last many years and most of the Kisan Sabhas were under their influence.
[44] For the government notification, including the reasons for its issue, etc., see *H.P.* F. 7/20/1934 and K.W. This file contains detailed information on the different organizations that were notified as unlawful bodies. Also see FR(1) September 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1934, and *The Tribune*, 13 and 14 September 1934.

Party (CSP), which had been formed at Bombay in October 1934, found some adherents in the province and in November we find the Punjab CSP making an appearance. It was reported to consist mainly of old NJBS members. By December 1934, they had a deputation touring the province to enlist members and establish branches.[45] However, none of these seemed to be really getting off the ground and it was a completely different organizational form that seems to have made it possible for the left-wing activists to get their act among the peasants really going. The *karza* or debt relief committees that soon mushroomed all over central Punjab represented this new form.

It appears that the idea behind the forming of the *karza* committees originated from a desire to "assist the peasants to obtain as much benefit as possible from the Relief of Indebtedness Act" and then "to apply the influence thus acquired to the promotion of less laudable movements".[46] The Punjab Relief of Indebtedness Act, 1934, besides placing an upper limit on the rates of interest, had a provision for the setting up of Debt Conciliation Boards to effect an amicable settlement of debts not exceeding Rs 10,000. It is from this provision that the idea of the *karza* or debt-relief committees obviously stemmed.

There is some confusion, however, about who actually began the process of organization of *karza* committees. Ujagar Singh Bilga, a grassroots-level Congress activist who was very active in the formation of the *karza* committees, suggests that it was Congressmen like himself who had started the process, and the Communists joined them a little later after some initial hesitation.[47] This is supported by the testimony of Bhagat Singh Bilga, a major Ghadar-Kirti leader of Punjab, who had then recently returned from Argentina via Moscow. He says it was the kisan section of the Congress that had started these *karza* committees, and Communists, especially Karam Singh Mann, were also active in them.[48] Karam Singh Mann, who was a major organizer from the Communist side of these *karza* committees, however, suggests that these were started by the Communists, but not in their own name, and that since they were very few, they also roped in the Akalis. According to him, before the Communists stepped in, these committees,

[45] See FR(1) October 1934, FR(1) November 1934, FR(1) December 1934, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1934, 18/11/1934, 18/12/1934.

[46] FR(1) March 1935, *H.P.* F.18/3/1935. For details, see my *Colonializing Agriculture*, Chapter 2, Section V.

[47] Ujagar Singh Bilga recalls that Kirti leaders such as Teja Singh Swatantar had just returned from abroad, and others were also returning, such as Bhagat Singh Bilga, etc. He says that we asked them to take on the job of training our workers. He also says that later these very same *karza* committees were changed to Kisan Sabhas. Ujagar Singh Bilga also says that they included Harijans in their propaganda campaign against indebtedness (interview).

[48] Bhagat Singh Bilga says that when he first came back, there were two sections of the Congress—the *sahukar* (moneylender) and the kisan section. The kisan section with people like Ujagar Singh Bilga had formed the *karza* committees (interview).

"the leader of whom was Ch. Chhotu Ram", existed only at the district level, there being no village-level organizations. It is quite possible that what he is calling the district level organizations were the Debt Conciliation Boards set up under the Relief of Indebtedness Act, which were closely allied to Chhotu Ram's name because he was not only a member of the committee that had suggested the legislation but was also the main campaigner on the issue.[49] Harkishen Singh Surjeet, too, maintains that these *karza* committees were started on the basis of a decision of the Communist Party.[50]

What is most likely, however, is that none of our witnesses are wrong, but are merely describing different parts of the elephant they had got hold of. In other words, if one puts the story together, then once the district-level Debt Conciliation Boards were initiated under the Act, given the pressing problem of debt, the idea emerged to extend these to the villages and simultaneously build up consciousness on the question of debt. The kisan section of the Congress, as Bhagat Singh Bilga called it, began to form these committees in the areas in which they were active. Communists, too, picked up the idea and, given their capacity for mobilization and organization and the fact that these committees served as a substitute for their own organization, implemented it with a vigour that others could not boast of, so that soon it began to look as if it was only the Communists who were active.

Regardless of the origins of the idea, however, there is little doubt that the movement to set up the *karza* committees touched a sympathetic chord in the peasant heart.[51] The Punjab Kisan Qarza Committee, with 52 members, was set up by Communists on 3 March 1935 in Amritsar.[52] The evidence is that Kirtis and CPI-affiliated Communists all combined together in the *karza* committees. The idea was to build up an organization and an agitation on the issue of cancellation of rural debts. The time was opportune as the peasants were heavily burdened with debt as a result of

[49] Karam Singh Mann says that since members of the Communist group were very few, they had to rely on the Akalis. "They had the following, we had the understanding, because of Marxism". They didn't know we were Communists, he says, "we were all members of the *karza* committees". He also mentions that Brij Narain helped in this work (interview).

[50] *Karza* Committees were formed because the Kisan Committee was banned, says Surjeet, obviously referring to the September 1934 ban on all Communist-connected organizations (interview).

[51] Bhagat Singh Bilga, for example, says that this movement enabled us to penetrate deep into the peasantry (interview). Ujagar Singh Bilga puts on record the fact that they rapidly recruited members (interview). Karam Singh Mann feels that this movement must have had a role in getting Chhotu Ram to pass the Debt legislation (later, in the period of the Unionist Ministry) (interview). Surjeet too feels that they succeeded in pushing the government into passing legislation (interview).

[52] See FR(1) March 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1935.

the Depression.[53] Nor is it surprising that the main success of the movement was in the Jullundur area, which was much more heavily indebted because of the small size of its holdings than, say, Amritsar.[54]

The pattern of activity was to go into the villages and to explain to the people that they could never get free of the burden of debt unless it was cancelled. Karam Singh Mann, the major Communist leader of this phase, had written a pamphlet in which he had graphically described the burden by saying that if they had a line of camels, and loaded each camel with one maund of rupees, the line of camels would extend to Calcutta—such was the burden of debt. This pamphlet was used with great effect to explain the point. After explaining the problem, the peasants would be asked to join the *karza* committee with a membership fee of one anna, and the village *karza* committee would be formed. As Ujagar Singh Bilga, the grassroots-level organizer, describes it: they first went to the smaller villages and formed the committees and then came to the bigger ones, which were the centres of political parties, and held meetings there. Obviously, the political message was also carried through these meetings which, in the words of the Government report, combined "agrarian agitation with communist propaganda".[55]

The culmination of this campaign came with the holding of the Doaba Rural Uplift Conference, "a communist organization with an innocent name", at Patara in Jullundur District in the middle of October 1935. Sohan Singh Josh presided, was given a rousing welcome at the Bulana railway station, and taken in a procession, in which red flags were very prominent, to the *pandal*. Master Kabul Singh, veteran peasant leader of the area, was chairman of the reception committee. Along with the cancellation of debts and the establishment of village *karza* committees, the conference also passed resolutions on the other accepted peasant demands such as land revenue on income tax basis. Repression against left-wing workers was condemned and the release of political prisoners demanded.

[53] Karam Singh Mann, one of the main organizers of this movement, says that they concentrated on *karza* committees because indebtedness was the main problem facing the peasantry and their emphasis on this issue attracted the peasantry towards them. Because of the Depression, even families like his own, which owned 4 squares (over 100 acres) of land, had to sell off their women's ornaments (interview). Surjeet recalls that the problem of indebtedness was very acute, peasants were losing land, and the issue appealed to all sections of peasants (interview).

[54] Sohan Singh Narangabadi, who belongs to Amritsar but had worked in the Jullundur area as well, points out that this was the reason for the slower rate of emigration from Amritsar as compared to Jullundur. The land holdings were much smaller in the latter, therefore their debt was much more. Karza Committees, too, were for the same reason found in Jullundur, and not in Amritsar (interview).

[55] See FR(1) October 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1935 and interviews with Ujagar Singh Bilga, Karam Singh Mann, Sohan Singh Narangabadi and Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

The conference, according to the government's estimate, attracted an audience of 4,000.[56]

While the chief form of the movement was agitation through meetings and conferences,[57] Harkishen Singh Surjeet maintains that it also led on occasion to refusal to pay debts. He cites the case of village Cheema, in which the usurers were prevented from occupying land that had passed into their hands in lieu of debt.[58] However, it is likely that this was the exception rather than the norm, as Cheema was a political village and a Communist stronghold, being the home of Baba Karam Singh Cheema, the Ghadar/Kirti leader. We do not get any other evidence of the movement actually resulting in the non-payment of loans.

The story of the *karza* committees essentially takes us through to the next important stage which began in 1936 with the coming into force of the new United Front line of the Comintern. In the last quarter of 1934 and in 1935, besides the Lyallpur anti-resettlement agitation which we have discussed earlier, there was very little activity except for the *karza* committee movement in the Jullundur area. In Amritsar District, the Akalis had shown some energy in organizing a couple of conferences,[59] and also in Lahore, where the usual resolutions on peasant demands had been passed.[60] Sheikhupura had held a zamindar conference,[61] but there was little else. If we draw up a balance-sheet for the years 1933–35, then Lyallpur, Amritsar and Jullundur districts stand out as centres of fairly sustained activity, followed by Hoshiarpur, Gurdaspur, Lahore, Sheikhupura and Ludhiana. (Interestingly, the first three retain their lead in the next phase from 1936–39.)

United Front, Election Campaign and All-India Organization

The Seventh Congress of the Comintern held in 1935 had reversed the sectarian line of its Sixth Congress and enunciated a policy of "United Fronts" which in colonial countries enjoined Communists to participate actively in "the mass anti-imperialist movements headed by the nationalists-reformists" and to seek joint action with them on the basis of an "anti-imperialist platform". Indian Communists were to strive for the establishment of "a united anti-imperialist front ... both from within and without the National Congress". Anticipating a change in the Indian Communists' attitude

[56] FR(1) October 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/18/1935, and *The Tribune*, 12 and 16 October 1935.

[57] See FR(1) March 1935, FR(1) October 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1935 and 18/10/1935; and interviews with Ujagar Singh Bilga, Karam Singh Mann and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

[58] Interview.

[59] See FR(1) December 1934, FR(1) February 1935, *H.P.* F. 18/12/1934, 18/2/1935.

[60] See *The Tribune*, 4 October, 28 November and 8 December 1935.

[61] See *The Tribune*, 4 October 1935.

towards itself as a result of the Seventh Congress line, the Congress Socialist Party (CSP), which had earlier barred Communists from membership in the party, reversed its policy at the meeting of its executive in Meerut in January 1936, and invited Indian Communists to join the party on an individual basis. Indian Communists were initially hesitant, as old habits of sectarianism engendered by the Sixth Congress line died hard, but by April 1936 had begun to enter the CSP, while maintaining their own secret separate organizational identity.[62]

In Punjab, this enabled the CPI-affiliated group to join up with the Congress Socialists and declare the goal of a United Peoples' Front of all anti-imperialist forces. It also enabled them to enter the Congress. The Ghadar-Kirti group, which was much the more important component, on the other hand, it appears, did not join the CSP. The reason for this was probably that given the CPI/Kirti differences, they would not want to be in the same organization as the CPI. But they certainly adopted the new United Front Line, as in any case it was more in keeping with their own understanding which had a strong nationalist orientation. So they readily entered the Congress. Therefore, from 1936 onwards, when we talk of Communists and Socialists organizing the peasantry, we must remember that they were simultaneously Congressmen: people knew them as Congressmen, and in many areas it was *they* who took the Congress name to the villages for the first time.

The change in the Comintern line coincided in India with a new phase of political activity. The Congress had emerged out of the slump following the Civil Disobedience Movement and was getting ready to fight the elections under the Government of India Act of 1935. The franchise had been significantly widened, and a massive mobilization effort was on the cards to convert its support into electoral strength. At the national level, the main campaigner turned out to be Jawaharlal Nehru, also the Congress president for the year, who had recently declared himself a believer in "socialism ... in the scientific, economic sense" from the Congress platform.[63] Jawaharlal Nehru turned his election campaign into a propaganda tour for "socialism", according to the concept, a legitimacy it had never before had in popular consciousness, and lending it the weight of the prestige of the Congress president and of himself personally. As a consequence, a whole new space—political and ideological—was created for the popularization of the socialist ideal and for the functioning of those who were committed to that ideal. It is not for us here to follow his trail as he trudged thousands of miles across the subcontinent, we shall only witness the whirlwind he created in Punjab.

[62] John Patrick Haithcox, *Communism and Nationalism in India*, New Jersey, 1971, pp. 212–13.
[63] Jawaharlal Nehru, *Selected Works*, Vol. 7, pp. 180–81.

Nehru made two visits to Punjab in 1936, one from 29 May to 3 June and the second from 28 July to 3 August; in the course of which he almost covered the whole province. The "rural" part of his tour, however, was concentrated in the central districts of Amritsar, Jullundur, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Ferozepur and Lahore. On his first trip, apart from making brief visits to the "notorious" villages of Jhaman and Khalra in Lahore District, where he congratulated the villagers for their bravery and talked socialism, the most significant event was his two addresses on the same day to the Sarhali Punjab Rajnaitik (political) conference. The crowds that appeared at Sarhali, a village in Amritsar District, to see and hear the Congress president broke all previous records in the province—one lakh people were reported to have come, some of them having walked 50 miles on foot. Baba Wasakha Singh, one of the most revered Ghadri heroes, presided; Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna, another Ghadri hero, unfurled the red flag in front of the Congress Socialist camp. The best horse in the area was secured for Jawaharlal Nehru and he was then taken in procession. Socialists, Kirtis, Riasti Praja Mandal, all presented addresses to him. In his second visit, at the end of July, the Mahilpur Doaba Dehati (rural) Political Conference in Hoshiarpur District was the high point, where again the crowds reportedly reached the one lakh figure. Smaller conferences he addressed at Bundala in Jullundur with Gopal Singh Quami as president and at Khanna with Karam Singh Mann in the chair. He also visited Ferozepore and Moga where he met many Ghadar/Kirti leaders and Socialist workers.[64]

The chief secretary of Punjab summed up the message that Nehru delivered in the following words:[65]

> Practically all his speeches were variations on the following theme:
>
> The basic trouble in India is poverty with its attendant trouble of unemployment, indebtedness and distress. The only cure I know for these troubles is socialism, but as long as British imperialism is dominant in India socialism is impossible. Therefore the first step is the attainment of independence from British influence. Once you are free, everything can be done.
>
> The speech generally ended up with the claim that Congress is the only organization in India which is able to fight the British Government, and

[64] This factual account of Nehru's two tours is compiled from the following: File on Appreciation of J.L. Nehru's Punjab speeches, *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936; FR(2) May 1936, FR(1) June 1936, FR(1) August 1936, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1936, 18/6/1936, 18/8/1936; *The Tribune*, 31 May 1936, 1 August 1936; interviews with Master Hari Singh, Ujagar Singh Bilga, Dalip Singh Jauhal, Ram Nath and H.S. Surjeet.

[65] Letter from Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab, to Hallett, Home Secretary, Government of India, Conf. No. J-54-s-S.B., dated Simla, 16 June 1936, in which a full appreciation of Nehru's visit is given. *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936.

> that therefore the Congress candidates should be supported at the coming elections.... In his first speech at Sarhali, he confined himself to explaining how every great thing, in which he included revolution, could be brought about only by the masses. Again at Jahman and Khalra, where he made very simple speeches, he attempted to explain the form of Government for which he was striving; it was to be a 'Panchayati Raj', in which all powers would be in the hands of the poor, and those who were at present members e.g. Police and other officials, would be the servants of the people.

We are concerned here not with the general effect on the election of Nehru's tours but on their impact on the peasants and the peasant movement. There is a rare unanimity among all our sources, ranging from the participant peasant leaders and contemporary government spokesmen, that Jawaharlal's tours, apart from furthering anti-imperialist consciousness, helped to foster a general climate in favour of the idea of socialism, created a vague discontent with the existing order, and gave a stimulus to socialist and communist activists.[66] It became much easier for left-wing activists to talk about socialism among the peasants than it had been earlier, and this for various reasons. One, socialism could now be urged as the ideology that was being propagated by the Congress president, by Jawaharlal Nehru, the great patriot, and could not be dismissed as the brainchild of some small extremist groups. Two, the opponents of socialism had a tougher time ahead of them, since they would now have to argue with the Congress president. For example, in the controversy that was currently prevailing over the flying of the red flag at Congress meetings in which the right wing was taking a strident position, Nehru deliberately and publicly tipped the scales in favour of the left wing by speaking under the red flag on three occasions in Punjab, including at Khanna under the presidentship of Karam Singh Mann, the well-known Communist leader. He thus helped to counter, says Surjeet, the anti-communist feelings that had developed among certain sections of the Punjab Congress.[67] Three, Jawaharlal Nehru talked of socialism in a deliberately vague way, without identifying it with any party or specific variety of canon, unlike the general left practice of asserting their own brand as the only pure one. This enabled all sections of the left to take advantage of and build on the atmosphere created by him, depending of course on their own capacity to do so. In other words, Jawaharlal's role, while widening the overall nationalist political space, was to give the whole

[66] For the government assessment, see *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936; FR(2) May 1936, FR(1) June 1936, FR(1) August 1936, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1936, 18/6/1936, 18/8/1936.

[67] Surjeet says Acharya Kripalani had issued a circular about the red flag not being allowed at Congress meetings. They therefore approached Nehru and he took a very positive attitude and came and addressed meetings under the red flag (interview).

of it a general socialist orientation or colour, so that the whole of the widened political space became potentially available to left wing political, ideological and organizational activity. In Surjeet's words, "Nehru had the capacity to address the sections that were not approachable by us."[68]

The government had prepared detailed assessments of his visits, and I quote below a few interesting extracts:

> The appeal which Jawaharlal has so far made to the peasant has been vague, probably deliberately so.... It is noteworthy that he never attempts to explain what he means by socialism. He is content to stir up discontent against the existing regime.... He is not aiming at immediate direct action, but the object of his rural tours is to create a suitable preliminary atmosphere for action. Indeed the interest which his speeches aroused indicates that the crude idea of socialism as a sort of universal cure is perhaps more widely spread than there seemed reason to believe.... His visit has proved the existence among the rural classes of interest in such questions as socialism and independence, and has stimulated this interest. It will undoubtedly encourage the numerous socialist and communist bodies which are attempting to spread their propaganda in rural areas.[69]
>
> Nehru's visits to the Punjab cause unrest, give undue prominence to grievances, real or imaginary and give subversive organizations an excellent chance of advertising themselves and pushing their doctrines. Jawaharlal himself has summed up the situation well. At Ferozepore he said "wherever I have gone in the Punjab large crowds of people have assembled: some come to see the fun, some to see me, while others are attracted by something". It seems that they are in search of something and come to find it. They have all got troubles and they come in the hope of being told a solution of them.[70]

[68] Interview. Surjeet expanded on this point by explaining that while they already had a revolutionary tradition—the Ghadar Party, the Babbar Akalis, etc.—Nehru's propaganda about socialism did contribute to the widening of the space and helped to fight anti-Communist feelings. Even amongst the peasantry, he said, if the Congress President extended support, 'it naturally added to our strength. He then gave the example of the States' Peoples' movement, saying that while it was true that Communists like Jagir Singh Joga, etc., were already in the forefront, but when Nehru came and addressed the Ludhiana conference in 1938 (AISPC session), "it came to have a wider support and cities also came into the movement and this added to our strength". "It must be understood in this relation: The basic strength is ours, (of) the traditions of struggle that we carried, but Nehru's visits and advocacy of the ideas of socialism and against feudal principles added to our strength. This is the real and proper understanding". (Interview).

[69] Letter from Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Hallett, Home Secretary, Government of India, Conf. No. J-54-s-S.B., dated Simla, 16 June 1936, in which a full appreciation and account of Nehru's first tour is given. *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936.

[70] Letter from Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Hallett, Home Secretary, Government of India, D.O. No. J-54, dated Simla, 1/3 September 1936, which contains an assessment of the after-effects of the first visit and the effects of the second one. *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936.

Even those officials who tended to favour the usual explanation for big crowds at political gatherings—that Indians liked nothing better than a *mela* and "that if you arrange a three days *mela* with free food, loudspeakers and a well-known figure head, you will naturally get a large audience of peasants for whom any gathering, which provides a diversion from their everyday humdrum life, has a very great appeal"[71]—could not but note that the effect was "to arouse a feeling of dissatisfaction with the existing state of affairs and a desire for change", and that "socialist propaganda... is likely to enlist adherents unless it is checked".[72] More concrete dangers were also apprehended—such as opposition to the settlements that were in progress in Lyallpur and Lahore and the one about to start in Amritsar in the autumn.[73] Already, in Sarhali Village, after Nehru's visit, difficulty had been experienced in collecting the *chowkidara* tax from the menials and, in Sarhali circle, in collecting revenue from the landowners.[74]

There is evidence indeed that the left-wing activists were quick to seize the opportunity to launch a major propaganda and organizational effort. For the Sarhali Conference, for example, both the Ghadar/Kirti group and Ahmad Din's Socialist group were in the forefront of the campaign. The Socialist group for many days prior to the conference toured the villages in the Amritsar District, and the Ghadar/Kirtis mobilized many of the old Ghadar workers who had taken no part in politics for many years.[75] After the conference as well, the momentum was sought to be kept up through conferences and meetings,[76] the most important of which was the one held at Cheema Kalan in Jullundur District in the third week of June.

Village-level mobilization for the Cheema Kalan Mazdur Kisan Conference began in early June, with daily meetings being held by a deputation of local workers. A *jatha* of 50 marched from Seron Village in Amritsar District all the 50 miles to Cheema Kalan asking peasants on the way to come to the Conference. Activists were busy in other neighbouring tehsils as well.[77] The Conference was presided over by Munshi Ahmad Din, the prominent

[71] These were the views expressed by the deputy commissioner of Hoshiarpur. *Ibid*.

[72] *Ibid*.

[73] Letter from Puckle to Hallett, dated 16 June 1936, op. cit., *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936. In Amritsar, in fact, a Bandobast Thukrao Committee had already come into existence. See FR(1) June 1936, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1936.

[74] Letter from Puckle to Hallett, dated 1/3 September 1936, *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936.

[75] FR(1) June 1936, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1936. Dalip Singh Jauhal, now a CPI (M) leader of Punjab, who was a young activist at the time, describes how they toured the area in squads and made collections and did propaganda for the conference. The conference was also used to distribute underground Communist literature (interview).

[76] FR(1) June 1936, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1936.

[77] For preparations for Cheema Kalan conference, see *The Tribune*, 9, 13 and 14 June 1936. The Fortnightly Report noted that these preliminary propaganda meetings have now become a regular feature of Communist activity and organisation. FR(2) June 1936, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1936.

Socialist leader, whose speech, for which he was later prosecuted, contained a sharp attack on imperialism in general and British Imperialism in particular, and was lavish in its praise of the Soviet Union.[78] Among the many familiar resolutions passed at the heavily-attended conference, were some new and unfamiliar ones such as the one declaring the willingness of all debt relief, that is, *karza*, committees to affiliate themselves to the Congress, and the one which demanded that all workers' and peasants' organizations be affiliated to the Congress in order to make it a mass anti-imperialist organization.[79]

The Cheema Kalan Conference was followed by numerous arrests of activists but this does not seem to have dampened the enthusiasm for Jawaharlal's second visit which came at the end of July. The government obviously tried hard to make things difficult the second time. On its own admission, the conference at Khanna that was addressed by Nehru was obstructed by arrests of and restrictions on activists.[80] Harkishen Singh Surjeet recalls that the government refused permission to hold the conference scheduled for Bundala, which was his own village, on the village common land, as was the general practice. So Surjeet ordered that the standing maize crop from four acres of his own land be cut down to make place for the conference! The crop was cut and the conference held, Gopal Singh Quami presiding and Jawaharlal Nehru the star attraction.[81]

The rest of the year was taken up with the election campaign. Peasant activists were also fully immersed in the campaign, on the side of the

[78] A translation of the speech made by Ahmad Din, who was reputed to be an excellent orator, is attached along with the letter from Puckle, Chief Secretary, Punjab, to the Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 13 July 1936, informing him that Ahmad Din Qassab and Abdul Aziz were being prosecuted under Section 124-A, I.P.C. for delivering seditious speeches at the Mazdoor Kisan Conference at Cheema Kalan, Jullundur District, on 20–22 June, 1936. The letter also noted that "both Abdul Aziz and Ahmad Din are the moving spirits of the Punjab Socialist Party and have been taking an active part in inculcating the doctrines of socialism among labourers and peasants". *H.P.* F. 36/2/1936.

[79] Other resolutions relating more specifically to economic demands of peasants were also passed. One of the more important ones related to measures for the relief of indebtedness, it being pointed out that they were inadequate and that land of small peasants was being bought up by big landlords. Suitable amendments should be made in the Land Alienation Act and land revenue should be placed on an income tax basis. Further, *Inam* and *Jagirdari* land should be distributed to poor peasants and *begar* should be abolished. Workers and peasants were the only ones capable of fighting Imperialism, Fascism and the next world war, and therefore they should organize themselves. *The Tribune*, 23 and 24 June 1936.

[80] See Puckle to Hallett, dated 1/3 September 1936, *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936. Also see FR(1) July 1936, *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936. At Mahilpur, it was reported that the campaign of arrests had increased the enthusiasm of the people for the Conference. *The Tribune*, 1 August 1936.

[81] Interview.

Congress.[82] Some specifically peasant conferences were also held,[83] but it was clear that the concentration was on mobilization for the elections due in January 1937. Seven Communists had got nominated on the Congress list—Sohan Singh Josh, Teja Singh Swatantar, Master Kabul Singh, Harjap Singh, Bibi Raghbir Kaur, Mange Ram Vats and Baba Rur Singh. Their election campaigns were conducted with the active help of all the peasant activists. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, for example, managed Master Kabul Singh's election campaign.[84] Karam Singh Mann was very active in Mian Iftikhar-ud-din's campaign.[85] In the villages of district Rohtak, the Congress conducted a vigorous campaign for Sri Ram Sharma.[86] In fact, the election campaign was itself a tremendous mobilizing force for the peasantry. As the Governor, H.W. Emerson, acutely observed at the time in a letter to the Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow:[87]

> I doubt whether any village in the Province has not been included in the election campaign by one party or another, and most villages have

[82] This is clear from the accounts of the election campaign contained in the interviews of many of the peasant leaders—Karam Singh Mann categorically said that they were working not only for Socialist or Communist candidates but for all Congress candidates, and along with other Congressmen. See interviews with Karam Singh Mann, H.S. Surjeet, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Ram Singh Majitha and Joginder Singh Chhina.

[83] See, for example, FR(2) September 1936, FR(1) October 1936, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1936, 18/10/1936; *The Tribune*, 12 and 15 September and 6 October 1936.

[84] He describes how they spent only Rs 2000 and that too had been collected from people in amounts of 2 and 4 annas. He also says that in Sohan Singh Josh's election, which he was contesting against one of the biggest landlords of the province, Sardar Raghbir Singh, they even saved Rs 3000 from what people gave. The whole campaign was conducted on bicycle (interview).

[85] Karam Singh Mann describes the campaign of Iftikhar-ud-din against Mirza Hamidullah Beg, who had been the Speaker of the Punjab Legislative Council for many years. He also recounts that in Josh's election, they saved money because people, when they came to vote, would leave 1 anna or 1 rupee along with the vote (interview).

[86] See FR(1) December 1936, *H.P.* 18/12/1936.

[87] Emerson to Linlithgow, dated 21 January 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/112; India Office Library and Records. This was part of the series of letters from the governors of provinces to the viceroy that was initiated by Lord Linlithgow in order to supplement the Fortnightly Reports, once there was the possibility of popular ministries coming to power under the 1935 Act, as the Fortnightly Reports, which would be seen by Indian, especially Congress, ministers could no longer be as frank as they used to be. For Punjab, it was even arranged that a separate memorandum on Congress activities would be prepared, so that the Fortnightly Reports, which would be read by other provinces also, could contain only colourless reports on Congress activities. This memorandum would be seen by the premier, that is, Sikandar Hayat Khan, and the governor and a copy would be attached to the Fortnightly Reports sent to the viceroy and the secretary of state, but not to other provinces. No references were to be made to this memorandum, except in personal communication to the governor. The Unionist premier fully concurred in this arrangement. See letter from Emerson, Governor, Punjab to Linlithgow, Viceroy, India, dated 31 July 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/113, IOL.

> had a constant succession of visits from canvassers. *There has certainly been a great stirring of the political consciousness of the masses*.... This has been specially marked in Sikh constituencies, and I was told the other day that with many of the smaller voters *there was a definite prejudice against any one who could be described as pro-Government* (emphasis added).

If indeed it was true that, if not all, a large number of villages in the province had been touched by the politicizing effects of the election campaign, the effects of this campaign are to be counted as more profound than that of any local peasant struggle on any specific economic issue, however militant. The "stirring of the political consciousness", without which no long-term movement for change can sustain itself, was an achievement that would prove invaluable in creating new possibilities for political action in the future. The election campaign had, after all, crystallized the issues in terms of pro-British and anti-British. The Unionists were to be opposed because they were loyalists, pro-British. The Congress candidates were to be supported because they stood for independence, for anti-imperialism, for struggle against oppression.[88] After independence would be people's rule or panchayati raj. Without independence first, there could be no socialism. All these ideas had been taken to corners where they had never been heard before, not even during the phases of mass anti-British struggle. The logic of the electoral process—that *all* areas are included in its ambit—pushed political parties to go into areas they would never dare or care to go into in normal times. For a struggle, you tend to mobilize only those whom you can count on, whom you have worked on earlier, since at that point it is their strength that you need. In elections, you cannot win without winning over even those who you may not know at all—hence the drive to extend yourself becomes inevitable.

In other words, the election campaign of 1936–37 had contributed significantly to the general ongoing process of politicization of the peasantry, and also to that process taking an anti-imperialist direction in many quarters. This undoubtedly strengthened the foundations on which an organized, united kisan movement was sought to be built by the first province-wide

[88] Karam Singh Mann, one of the major Communist leaders at this time, recalls that the dominant issue was anti-British. "We have to not allow the Unionists to come to power, that was our aim." The Sikh masses, he says, were anti-Imperialist by that time. Sohan Singh Narangabadi, an active worker in the Amritsar area, who campaigned for Baba Gurdit Singh, of Komagatamaru fame, as the unofficial Congress candidate against Sardar Partap Singh Kairon, the Akali candidate who was officially supported by Gopi Chand Bhargava's group in the Congress, says that our election propaganda was: support the Congress because it is fighting against the British. If you vote for Congress and strengthen its hands, it will throw out the British quickly. Then, after independence, there will be prosperity (interviews).

peasant organization that not only constituted itself but also succeeded in establishing itself as the leader of the Punjab peasants, namely, the Punjab Kisan Sabha. The setting up of this organization was, after all, a matter of time once the All-India Kisan Sabha had established itself at Lucknow in April 1936.[89] Punjab was well-represented on the All-India Kisan Committee from the very beginning—Karam Singh Mann (Convenor), Sohan Singh Josh, Munshi Ahmad Din, Ujagar Singh, Gurcharan Singh, Professor Brij Narain, Dev Raj Sethi, Ram Singh Johar and Kabul Singh Govindpuri were members of the first organizing committee formed at the Meerut *Kisan* Conference in January 1936.[90] The first All-India Kisan Congress (later Sabha) session was held along with the Lucknow session of the Congress in April 1936, and Sohan Singh Josh and Munshi Ahmad Din were delegates from Punjab. The Lucknow Kisan Congress had also charged the delegates from the provinces to organize branches of the all-India body in their provinces.[91] The Punjab Kisan Committee was thus organized on 7 March 1937 as the provincial branch of the All-India Kisan Sabha. A meeting of Kisan delegates from 13 districts was held at the Bradlaugh Hall, Lahore, and a committee of 15 members set up. Four representatives of the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal which organized the popular struggles in the princely states in Punjab were also taken on the committee, as were representatives of all the left groups in the province, the Kirtis, the CSP, the CPI, etc. Baba Jwala Singh, an old Ghadrite of remarkable energy and commitment was the president, B.P.L. Bedi, the prominent Socialist leader, was the general secretary and Kartar Singh Gill, a Moscow-trained Ghadar/Kirti activist, the secretary.[92] The significance of the formation of the Punjab Kisan Sabha is not to be underestimated, especially if we recall that the first attempt to make a provincial-level organization was in 1925,[93] and 12 years and many attempts later, the first viable provincial organization was formed, which actually went on to hold organizational elections, elect delegates, have fairly regular annual meetings and was also able to coordinate the activity in different areas, extend to new areas and sections, bring the combined weight of the movement to bear on any one issue or locality, and maintain links with the national level organizations. All these achievements of the Punjab Kisan Sabha will unfold before us as we follow the story of the peasant movement in Punjab through its "classical" phase, spanning the years 1937–39.

[89] M.A. Rasul, *A History of the All India Kisan Sabha*, Calcutta, 1974, p. 3.

[90] *Congress Socialist*, 25 April 1936.

[91] Rasul, *A History of the All India Kisan Sabha*, pp. 4 and 7.

[92] Rasul, *A History of the All India Kisan Sabha*, p. 24; Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle,* (Vol. 2), p. 205; Bhagat Singh Bilga (interview).

[93] See Chapter 2.

Pro-British and Anti-Peasant: Unionists Under Provincial Autonomy

It is imperative, however, to interrupt our tale at this point and take another detour, this time to remind ourselves that this "classical" phase was played out with the backdrop being the Unionist ministry in power. The elections had yielded 95 seats to the Unionists in a house of 175, thus giving them a clear majority.[94] They were also supported by the Khalsa National Party (loyalist Sikhs) and the National Progressive Party (mainly a party of moderate Hindu communalists) and the Muslim League. The opposition included the Congress and the Akalis, who had seat adjustments with each other and later functioned as one party in the Assembly, and a few independents and the Ahrars, making up a total of about 44. Sikandar Hayat Khan who hailed from one of the biggest landlord families of the province, and had earlier served as revenue member in Punjab and a deputy governor of the Reserve Bank of India, became the premier or chief minister. Chhotu Ram, also of the Unionist Party, was minister for development, Khizar Hyat Khan Tiwana and Mian Abdul Haye were the other two Unionists who were ministers, bringing the total strength of Unionists to four in a Cabinet of six. Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, Revenue Minister, and Mr. Manohar Lal, Finance Minister, represented the Khalsa National Party and the National Progressive Party respectively. This ministry lasted from April 1937 to December 1942.[95]

The general political stance of the Unionist ministry may be summed up in the words of the Governor, H.D. Craik, who, after an experience of almost one-and-a-half-years of the ministry's functioning, wrote to the Viceroy on 10 September 1938 describing Sikandar Hayat Khan as "the most genuine and influential friend that Britain has in India".[96] Craik was

[94] Election Returns for 1937, *L/P&J*/8/472, IOR. The Unionist Party did not fight the elections on the basis of a fixed list of candidates, etc., but at times there were 2 or 3 "Unionist" candidates in one constituency, and the winning candidate was finally declared the "official" Unionist candidate. The candidates were supposed to rely on their local standing and influence, most of them coming from big landlord and *pir* (religious head) families of the province, than on the Unionist Party's mobilization and influence. In fact, compared to the others, the Unionists hardly did any canvassing, relying on their traditional influence to get into the Assembly and into power. They had effectively mobilized the religious influence of the Pirs behind them. In fact, such a large number of candidates went on changing or deciding their party affiliation that Unionist strength went up from 90 after the elections to 95 by April 1937 and 100 by July 1938. See FR(2) February 1937, *H.P.* 18/2/1937; *L/P&J*/8/472, IOR; Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Rahj: 1849–1947*, New Delhi, 1988, pp. 101–14; David Gilmartin, "Religious Leadership and the Pakistan Movement in the Punjab", *Modern Asian Studies*, 13, 3, 1979, p. 504.

[95] Returns of 1937 Elections, *L/P&J*/8/472, IOR; FR(1) and (2) February 1937, *H.P.* 18/2/1937; Ian Talbot, *Punjab and the Raj*, pp. 101–4.

[96] Craik to Brabourne, Acting Viceroy, 10 September 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F.125/87, IOL.

obviously overly pleased by Sikandar's recent support in the efforts being made to curb anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda[97] as well as by his assurance of delivering "sixteen annas loyal and reliable" men to the army in the coming war[98]—but even otherwise the British had little or nothing to complain of by way of the Unionists' handling of power. The previous Governor, H.W. Emerson, in his assessment given after the ministry had completed a year in office, had struck an equally contented note:[99]

> My own relations with the Ministry as a whole, with the Premier and individual Ministers, could not have been better. They have gone out of their way to consult me and have almost invariably accepted my advice.... The relations between the Ministry and officers and between individual Ministers and Secretaries have been excellent. There is no apprehension among Government servants, who are serving the new Government loyally and well.

Even earlier, the governor had noted with approval the Unionists' tough policy towards law and order, and especially towards Communists. Sikandar Hayat Khan was in charge of law and order, and his relations with the police and the CID were excellent and he had supported their proposals. One example of his "correct" policy was his refusal to release Teja Singh Swatantar, the very important Kirti leader, who had been declared elected in a bye-election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly. He had also refused to reverse orders of restraint served on many other Communists and was quite willing to take action against others as well.[100] When trouble broke out in the Indian state of Kalsia in October 1938, Sikandar readily agreed to notify the Indian States (Protection) Act in a number of Punjab districts which prevented them from being used as bases of agitation against the state. He even made the rather original suggestion "that the best form of countering Congress agitation against the States would be for the States to retaliate by sending paid agitators into the province concerned with instructions to do everything possible to embarrass the Ministry".[101] Once again, the governor had occasion to assure the viceroy that not only their interests, but that of their friends as well, were safe in Unionist hands:[102]

[97] Craik reported to Brabourne, the Acting Viceroy, that it was Sikandar who had pushed Jinnah to support the Dissuasion from Recruitment Bill in the Central Assembly on the grounds that Punjab wants it, and that if Jinnah wants Punjab's support, he better support the Bill. Craik to Brabourne, 24 August 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/1987; IOL.

[98] Craik to Brabourne, 10 September 1938, *ibid*.

[99] Emerson to Linlithgow, 5 April 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86, IOL.

[100] Emerson to Linlithgow, 3 July 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/113, IOL.

[101] Craik to Brabourne, 17 October and 22 October 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/87, IOL.

[102] Craik to Brabourne, 17 October 1938, *Ibid*.

> As regards practical suggestions for protecting States from agitation fomented and controlled in British India, I think that so long as the Punjab has a Ministry of the same political complexion as the present Ministry, the Provincial Government would certainly be prepared to co-operate in a sympathetic spirit with the State authorities concerned. But I fully realise that in Congress provinces the same co-operation cannot be expected....

Chhotu Ram, the other most important member of the cabinet as far as peasants were concerned, despite his supposed pro-peasant image, was no less hostile to nationalist and left mobilization of the peasantry. In fact, he saw them as his major competitors since, unlike the big Muslim landlord members of the Unionist Party, he had to maintain a populist stance to survive as the leader of the Hindu Jat peasants of eastern Punjab. Therefore, he had a highly populist political style, and carried on a public campaign against the Congress and the left wing.[103] Besides, the inveterate opportunist that he was, he quickly retreated from the favourable stand he had been taking on the question of reduction of land revenue and its assessment on the same basis as income tax when he was out of power (1927–37), and began to readily mouth the old official arguments about land revenue reduction and development being contradictory goals.[104] His role in the debt relief and other agrarian legislation is more controversial and we shall discuss it at length later when we deal with the whole controversy on the issue. In other words, Chhotu Ram was no friend of the peasant movement but an adversary, and a formidable one at that, as we shall soon see.

As is apparent, the point we wish to make here is that the peasant movement in Punjab had to function in a hostile political context in the crucial years from 1937 to 1939, years in which, otherwise, a particular constellation of forces had formed that was ideally suited for the "take-off" of the Indian peasant movement. The formation of the CSP and the adoption of the United Front line by the Communists had enabled the left forces to come together, however temporarily, and work unitedly within the Congress; this in turn had resulted in the formation of an all-India organization of peasants, the All-India Kisan Sabha (AIKS), as well as of its provincial branches such as the one in Punjab; the election campaign had presented a unique opportunity for popular mobilization—an opportunity used by

[103] For an excellent study of Chhotu Ram's politics, see Prem Chowdhry, *Punjab Politics*: *The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram* In Chapter 8 of this book, titled 'Chhotu Ram's Ideology and Propaganda', she shows at length how he manipulated to acquire his pro-peasant, radical, even anti-Government image and how the reality was quite sordid in terns of his willingness to collude with British officialdom, his basically loyalist approach, his opposition to tenant rights, his refusal to do anything to actually reduce the burden of land revenue, etc., when in power.

[104] See Emerson to Linlithgow, 22 May 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/113, IOL.

Nehru to spread the idea of socialism; the elections had resulted in the formation of Congress ministries in seven provinces, an event that created a new political atmosphere in the country and gave a tremendous fillip to popular political activity, especially among the peasants, and not the least because the increase in civil liberties enabled a freedom of expression, of movement, of association, that Indians had never known before. While the Punjab was one with the rest of the country in most of these respects, the one star missing from the constellation in the Punjab sky was the one representing the Congress ministry. Thus, when we compare the peasant movement in Punjab in these years with its counterpart in Bihar or the UP or Andhra or Kerala, we must not forget that it had to function in a basically hostile environment, whereas in these regions, regardless of tensions and even quarrels between the right wing and the left wing, kisan workers and zealous administrators, the fact of "our own government being in power" meant that the atmosphere was basically congenial. For one Soli Batlivala in Madras Presidency, whose prosecution by Rajaji's government became a *cause celebre* for the Indian left, there were many such as Bhagat Singh Bilga, who was hounded and interned in his village, Teja Singh Swatantar, who was detained as a state prisoner under Regulation III of 1818, one of the most draconian laws, and Harkishen Singh Surjeet, who was externed from the province and had to live in Saharanpur in Congress-ruled UP, and hundreds of others who faced arrest, internment, prosecution, interrogation and torture under Unionist rule. The *Kirti* magazine was forced to migrate to Meerut, again in Congress-ruled UP, and emerge as the *Kirti Lehar*. Whatever be the achievements or the failings of the peasant movement in Punjab, they have to be understood in the context of the Unionist ministry's continuation of the traditional British policy of handling disaffection among the Punjabi peasants-who-were-potential-soldiers with a mailed fist. To organize an open, non-violent, mass-based movement—which requires a certain amount of democratic political space to blossom—in a situation where your cadre is being constantly whisked away, your leaders silenced and your masses alternately bribed and threatened, was no child's play.

1937: Heyday of Everyday Peasant Politics

The momentum generated by the election campaign was not only maintained but increased after it was over. In fact, the year 1937 may be said to mark the real beginning of the most vigorous phase of the peasant movement in pre-Independence Punjab. In 1937, one can begin to get the feel of the intensity of the political activity that characterized the years till the outbreak of the Second World War. Even though there were no specific

"struggles" in this year, no "*morchas*" or "satyagrahas", the movement in fact reached a very high level, with consistent village-level campaigns culminating in a series of big conferences in September and October. Further, there was ample evidence that the unity of different political strands—Congress, Socialist, Communist and also some Akali groups—was actually working on the ground. A brief profile of the year follows.

In the first quarter, the districts of Amritsar, Jullundur, Gurdaspur and Hoshiarpur witnessed a great deal of political activity among the kisans.[105] In Jullundur, the District Mazdur Kisan Dal was busy organizing village meetings and conferences.[106] In Amritsar the District Bandobast Committee, formed a year ago in June to resist the new settlement, was sending its workers on tours of villages and attempting to form branch committees in the villages.[107] At Srigobindpur in Gurdaspur, a Kisan Conference was held, and the everyday activity reached such a pitch that the deputy commissioner wanted to take action.[108] The Congress had given a call for observing 1 April as anti-Constitution Day and mobilization in the villages had been going on to make it a success. Reports showed that eight villages in Ludhiana District and 22 out of 33 villages of the Khaira sub-station of Lahore District had observed the strike and it is likely that there were others as well which went unreported.[109]

The pace quickened in the second quarter, with kisan conferences in Ludhiana, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar and Lyallpur.[110] There were terrible hailstorms in April in many districts, and Communist Members of the Legislative Assembly (MLAs) toured the villages on bicycles assessing the damage.[111] Peasants themselves were quick to demand relief: in Hoshiarpur they held meetings criticizing the false reports sent by the tahsildar[112] and

[105] FR(2) March 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1937.

[106] The District Kisan Mazdoor Dal was the name of the Kirti Kisan Organization. In Jullundur, we find this name being used for quite some time for organizational purposes, till it came to be substituted by the Congress Committees and Kisan Sabhas in 1938. The District Mazdoor Kisan Dal organized a number of meetings, including one at Gharial in Adampur Doaba police station area addressed by Master Mota Singh Anandpuri, a prominent socialist leader, another at Chima Kalan and yet another at Kartarpur. See *The Tribune*, 13 January, 4 and 28 March 1937.

[107] The Amritsar Bandobast Committee, for example, had planned to hold daily village meetings from 3–13 March. FR(2) February 1937 and F.R. (1) April 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1937 and 18/4/1937.

[108] FR(2) February 1937, FR(1) and (2) March 1937, FR(1) April 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1937, 18/3/1937, 18/4/1937.

[109] *The Tribune*, 28 March 1937 carried reports of village level mobilization for the hartal in Jullundur District. Also see FR(1) and (2) April 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1937.

[110] See *The Tribune*, 6, 18, 27 May 1937; FR(1) and (2) April 1937, FR(1) June 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1937 and 18/6/1937.

[111] FR(2) April 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1937.

[112] *The Tribune*, 6 and 18 May 1937, reports meetings in villages in Hoshiarpur.

in Amritsar a deputation representing three tahsils marched to meet the deputy commissioner.[113] Jullundur peasants were honoured with a visit by Professor N.G. Ranga who toured extensively, accompanied by the Socialist leaders, B.P.L. Bedi and Freda Bedi, and was very impressed by the level of organization and by the degree of left influence.[114] Some peasants from Amritsar District, "drawn from the disaffected areas where Ghadar and Kirti leaders reside", it seems, took a great deal of interest in a number of left-wing conferences held in Amritsar City in June. The Fortnightly Report noted that though "much of the talk was beyond the comprehension of these simple audiences", yet they "will no doubt on their return home discuss events and thus help to create an impression of the growing strength of Socialism and Communism".[115]

There was also a significant growth in Congress activity in the rural areas. The south-eastern districts of Rohtak and Gurgaon, and Lyallpur and Sheikhupura in the central part of the province were the special targets of Congress attention.[116] In Gurgaon, there was some news of Congress activity among the tenants of the Ingram or Skinners' Estate, whom we might remember from their agitation in 1929–30, but it soon died down.[117] A vigorous Muslim mass contact campaign was launched in Hoshiarpur villages by the Congress;[118] and enrolment of members was pushed hard in all areas where they had a base.[119]

To add to the colour, Chhotu Ram toured the central districts in May, criticizing the Congress in public meetings held in the countryside. He specially chose for his attention the districts of Hoshiarpur, Jullundur and Ludhiana, where the Congress and Communists had been most active.[120]

The second half of the year was dominated by the big conferences that were to be held in September and October—preparations for some of these

[113] *The Tribune*, 25 April 1937.

[114] *The Tribune*, 1 and 7 April 1937. Ranga made another tour of Jullundur in September in which he visited a very large number of villages. *Ibid.*, 12 September 1937.

[115] The conferences held were: The Punjab Congress Socialist Conference, Indian Progressive Writers Association Conference, Civil Liberties Conference, Political Prisoners Defence Conference and Riasti Praja Mandal Conference. FR(1) June 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1937.

[116] See *The Tribune*, 18 and 27 May 1937; FR(1) and (2) May 1937, FR(1) June 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1937 and 18/6/1937.

[117] FR(1) May 1937 and FR(1) June 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1937 and 18/6/1937. Also see Emerson to Linlithgow, 24 April and 19 June 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/113, IOL. The Government had clearly got very worried with the initial reports of Congress trying to hold an inquiry into tenant grievances and the reported interest of Nehru in the whole affair. It was considerably relieved when "the indirect efforts" of the Unionist ministry and the substitution of the Indian Deputy Commissioner by a European succeeded in averting the trouble apprehended. *Ibid.*

[118] FR(1) June 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1937.

[119] *The Tribune*, 27 May 1937; FRs for May and June 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1937 and 18/6/1937.

[120] Emerson to Linlithgow, 22 May 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/113, IOL.

at least began as early as in June.[121] The kind of conference that we first witnessed as part of Nehru's election tour—where thousands of peasants would collect, the president-elect would be taken in a huge procession, a free *langar* (kitchen) would be run for three days and a galaxy of national and provincial-level leaders would collect—was to become the staple of the peasant movement in the province. They served as big shows of strength of peasants to the outside world, and of their own movement to the peasants. When peasants came to these gatherings and saw thousands more like themselves, when they heard important people from the city, whose names they had perhaps heard from some fellow-peasant who had travelled more widely in the world, criticizing the government and the police in no uncertain terms, when they saw their own local leaders who came to mobilize them in their villages mixing with the bigger leaders from outside, when they saw on the stage the Ghadri babas whose sacrifices and heroism had endowed them with an almost super-human aura, when all these galaxies were even joined by Jawaharlal Nehru, the son of the rich father whose clothes used to be washed in Paris but who had sacrificed everything for the country, and who was close to the Mahatma himself, then some of the sense of isolation—on which is founded the fear of authority, the reluctance to resist, the tendency to accept in silence rather than fight back—began to fall away and a slow but growing consciousness of their own strength began to take its place.

The spate of conferences started in the third week of September. At Barapind in Phillaur Tahsil in Jullundur District, Swami Sahajanand, General Secretary of the AIKS, was the guest of honour. He was taken in a procession of 2,000 men wearing red shirts, carrying sickles and red flags, all the way from the railway station to the site of the conference. Photographs of Lenin and Stalin were prominently displayed on the stage. Government reports put the size of the audience at 10,000 whereas the organizers claimed 50,000. The conference lasted from 21 to 24 September.[122]

In Ferozepore District, too, preparations had been going on for a long time for the conference held at Daudhar from 18–20 September. Baba Rur Singh, now an MLA, Bibi Raghbir Kaur, another MLA, and Mubarak Sagar, the Socialist leader, were the prominent personalities at the conference.[123] At Nowshera Punnuan in Amritsar District, a big Kisan Bandobast

[121] The preparations for the Barapind Kisan Conference began very early—in June itself. For this and other conferences see *The Tribune*, 30 June and 15 July 1937, and FR(2) July 1937, FR(1) and (2) August 1937, FR(1) September 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1937, 13/8/1937, and 18/9/1937. Jwala Singh Barapind, a grassroots level worker of village Barapind, gives a very interesting account of the preparations for the Barapind Conference (interview).

[122] *The Tribune*, 23 September 1937; FR(2) September 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1937; and *Congress Socialist*, 2 October 1937.

[123] See FR(2) September 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1937.

Conference was held on 29 and 30 September, where Jayaprakash Narayan, the CSP leader, was the chief guest and Munshi Ahmad Din also spoke.[124] In Gujranwala, Sohan Singh Josh attended the peasant conference at village Kingranwali in the third week of September.[125] In Lyallpur, two conferences were held around this time, one at Pakka Jandiala and another at Chak No. 301 G.B.[126] In Sargodha, a Fauji Lawaris Conference was organized which Nehru also attended.[127]

As if this was not enough, a mammoth conference was held at Garhdiwala in Hoshiarpur District from 9 to 10 October. This was organized in the name of the Congress as the Provincial Political Conference. The Procession of the President-elect, Sardul Singh Caveeshar, reached 20,000, according to the government estimates, and the audience at the first session was 30,000. This went up to 50,000 according to the government estimate, and one lakh according to the organizers, on the third day when Jawaharlal Nehru came to address the gathering. As had become usual those days, the main conference was accompanied by a number of meetings by allied or subsidiary organizations. The Kirti Mazdur Dal held a poetical symposium attended by 10,000; the Mazdur Kisan Conference attracted 25,000 and was addressed by Jayaprakash Narayan and Sohan Singh Josh; the Riasti Praja Mandal Conference was attended by 18,000 and presided over by Lala Sham Lal, the Congress leader; the Political Prisoners' Release Conference was presided over by Gopi Chand Bhargava and attracted 30,000–40,000 people.[128] (The estimates given here all made by the government.) Another important conference was held in Jind State on 16 October. B.P.L. Bedi chaired and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati attended this first ever Kisan conference in a princely state organized by the Punjab Kisan Sabha.[129]

The conference-organizing capacity of the activists had yet not been exhausted as these were followed up by other conferences, though not so massive. In Gurgaon, Lyallpur, Amritsar, Sheikhupura, Lahore, Hoshiarpur and Jullundur, village tours and meetings, conferences, enrolment of members of Kisan Sabha and Congress had continued uninterrupted till the end

[124] See FR(1) October 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1937; *The Tribune*, 1 October 1937; *Congress Socialist*, 16 October 1937.

[125] *The Tribune*, 23 September 1937.

[126] FR(2) September 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1937; *The Tribune*, 24 September 1937.

[127] FR(1) October 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1937; and *Congress Socialist*, 30 October 1937. This was meant to highlight the grievances of disinherited sons of colonists who were given land on primogeniture terms. "Lawaris" means disinherited, and "fauji" means a soldier. The grants were possibly given only to ex-soldiers.

[128] FR(1) October 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1937; *Congress Socialist*, 30 October 1937.

[129] *Congress Socialist*, 16 October 1937.

of the year.[130] While the non-left section of the Congress had been particularly active in the south-eastern districts of Rohtak and Gurgaon (in the latter even advocating non-payment of land revenue at one stage[131]), as well as in Lyallpur, Sheikhupura, Hoshiarpur and Lahore, the Communists and Socialists (also in the Congress at this time) were more active in Jullundur, Amritsar, Gurdaspur, Ferozepore and Ludhiana.

The fact that the political organizations could organize such a large number of conferences in such a concentrated period showed that they had acquired a sufficiently large number of cadre as well as adherents to sustain such a massive effort. Since these conferences were also financed largely by collections of grain and money made by activists from surrounding villages, it also showed that a certain amount of sympathy and support had been created. The large size of the audience testified to the growing interest in political affairs, which could not but lead to an enlargement of political consciousness. One could roughly estimate that the kind of meeting or conference that would attract roughly 1,000–2,000 people a couple of years ago, would now draw about 5,000–10,000 and where there would be 5,000 or 6,000 people earlier, now there would be 20,000–30,000.

It is significant that this qualitative growth in the organizational, ideological and political strength of the peasant movement had been achieved without any accretion to the list of economic demands and without any "struggles" being fought. The economic demands remained more or less the same—land revenue assessment on income tax basis, cancellation of debts, no increase in land revenue at new settlements, remissions when crops failed or were damaged, abolition of extra cesses such as *chahi*, *chowkidara*, *malba*, etc., and of *thikri pehra* and *begar*. However, the demand for release of political prisoners of all varieties was beginning to be pushed with greater vehemence. Criticism of the Unionist ministry by comparing it with the Congress ministries was very common, and went hand in hand with a general tendency to sharply attack the government, the police, the zaildars, etc. Of course, anti-imperialism continued to remain an essential part of the ideology and politics of the peasant movement.[132]

The burgeoning forth of the anti-government movement in the rural areas clearly had the administration worried. In October, a conference was

[130] FR(1) and (2) July 1937, FR(1) and (2) August 1937, FR(1) and (2) September 1937, FR(1) and (2) October 1937, FR(2) November 1937, FR(1) December 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1937, 18/8/1937, 18/9/1937, 18/10/1937, 18/11/1937, 18/12/1937, *The Tribune*, 15 July, 12 September, 29 October, 5 November, 11 November and 16 December 1937 and 24 April 1938 (for annual report on CSP activities in Lahore District); *Congress Socialist*, 4 September 1937, 27 November 1937. Congress membership had increased to 128, 855, of which 94, 772 were from rural areas, as compared to a total of 26, 511 in the last year. FR(2) November 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1937.

[131] See FR(2) September 1937, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1937.

[132] This list of demands is compiled from a reading of all the sources, and these have already been cited earlier in one form or another, therefore I am not repeating them.

called of officials of the Hoshiarpur, Jullundur and Ludhiana districts which included the commissioner and the deputy inspector-general of police of Jullundur division, the superintendents of police and deputy commissioners of the three districts and the premier and the governor, to discuss the general situation in these three districts where there had been "much Communist and Congress activity during the past three months". It emerged from the discussions that because the officials had been instructed that once provincial autonomy was in force they were to maintain a distance from party politics, they had generally allowed things to drift. It was now made clear to them that communism "is a subversive movement opposed to Government as such", and has to be fought.[133] Yet, even later, the governor continued to be worried that the Unionists and their supporters were not doing enough to counter the anti-government propaganda:[134]

> There have been very few meetings indeed organised or addressed by supporters of the Government other than the Ministers, and there is no comparison between the number of meetings organised by the Congress or Communists and those organised in support of Government. District officers frequently comment on this, and unless the ministerial party wakes up, it is likely to lose ground. Similarly, nothing tangible has yet resulted from efforts made a few months ago to start a pro-Government newspaper.

Thus, by the time the year 1937 drew to a close, the anti-imperialist political forces seemed to have gained a distinct edge in the battle for the mind and heart of the Punjabi peasant.

[133] Emerson to Linlithgow, 8 October 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/113, IOL.
[134] Emerson to Linlithgow, 18 December 1937, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/113, IOL.

Five

Peasant Upsurge: Reaching the High-Water Mark, 1938–39

If the peasant movement in Punjab can be said to have made a qualitative leap forward in the period extending from mid-1936 till the end of 1937, then in the years 1938 and 1939 it reached its most mature phase of the pre-Independence years. The movement blossomed forth in many directions: new areas, new issues, new demands were introduced and the older bases were fortified further. Any number of specific struggles—or *morchas* as they were popularly called—developed in these years, and, while it would be impossible to deal at length with all of them, I shall attempt to bring to the reader something of the flavour of the different varieties of real-life dramatic performances staged by the Punjab peasants. I shall try to keep within a rough chronological structure, though it will not be possible to adhere to it strictly as many movements overlap with each other.

I begin the story of these climactic years of the movement with the tenants of the canal colonies of Nili Bar, Montgomery and Multan, and this for two reasons. One, chronologically they have the first right to attention. Second, their movement is a good example of the new phase of the peasant movement represented by the formation of the Punjab Kisan Committee in March 1937, a united provincial-level organization which could plan and extend the movement to new areas, which could send trained activists from Jullundur or Amritsar to work in Montgomery or Multan as part of a concerted plan to extend the movement to the backward areas, to areas where tenants-at-will dominated, and which could use the strength of the strong areas to build up the strength of the weak ones. In the words of Bhagat Singh Bilga, one of the most perceptive participant observers of the peasant movement of our period, and one who, as one of the most trusted members of the Ghadar/Kirti Party, was privy to the decision-making within this group from which the vast

majority of the active workers of the Punjab peasant movement were drawn:[1]

> The peasant movement in Punjab was not a spontaneous one—it was fully planned.... After the formation of the Kisan Committee, we decided that we were not going to allow any longer an uneven development of the movement in Punjab. In central Punjab—in Lahore, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Jullundur, Ludhiana and Ferozepore, Kisan Sabhas were already in existence, and a political movement was also there. But there was no movement in the West—in Rawalpindi, Multan, Montgomery, and in the East in the Indian States. The Praja Mandal movement was there, but it was not so strong.... There were two big stalwarts of the Punjab Kisan Movement, Baba Jwala Singh and Baba Rur Singh Chuharchak. Baba Jwala Singh said: 'Where nobody goes, I will go; I will go to Patiala, to Nabha, to Kalsia, which are the strongholds of reaction'. They were the best organizers from the Ghadar Party.... So we planned that the best workers would be sent to plough the barren fields.... In West Punjab, beyond Lahore, the *muzara* (tenant) belt started. They had no rights worth the name. Baba Jwala Singh went there, along with Prof. Jalwant Singh and Ram Singh Ghalamala.... In the muzara belt, we sent our best organizers, such as Naina Singh Dhoot, Boojha Singh, Ujagar Singh Bilga.

Tenants' Struggle in the Canal Colonies: 1938–39

The problems faced by tenants (or more properly sharecroppers) in Punjab (as detailed in my *Colonializing Agriculture*, Chapter 4) were that they had no occupancy rights, no security of tenure, they were tenants-at-will, with no legal curbs on rent enhancement. But the tenants we are about to meet were not even strictly speaking tenants, but sub-tenants of lease-holding companies who leased large chunks of colony land from the government. How this system operated and how it came into being is best described in the words of the governor:[2]

> Large areas of land on (the Sutlej Valley) Project are leased by Government on temporary leases for three, four or five years pending their

[1] Bhagat Singh Bilga was a Moscow-trained leader of the Ghadar/Kirti Party. He became general secretary of the Punjab Kisan Sabha at its first regular session held on the basis of delegates elected by primary members at Lyallpur in October 1938. Immediately thereafter he was interned in his village. In fact in the ten years that he spent in India after his return, between 1935 and 1945, he was a completely free man for only one year, the other nine he spent either interned in his village, or in jail, or underground (interview).

[2] Craik to Linlithgow, 22 November 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/87.

> allotment to permanent settlers. This system has been in force for some years, because it is for obvious reasons uneconomical to put a large area on the market simultaneously. These temporary leases are allotted on a system of calling for tenders and in some cases are taken up by capitalists who secure very large areas. The lessees put in their own sub-tenants and naturally enough are anxious to make as much profit as they can out of the land in the comparatively short period available. There is no doubt that in many cases they more or less rack-rent the sub-tenants, who usually pay in kind. The commonest form of rent is half the produce, calculated after considerable deductions in favour of the landlord have been made from the common heap, and the sub-tenant has to pay all the canal dues. In these days of low prices this is a very severe rent and it is a fact that the sub-tenants have a substantial grievance in this respect.

Many lease-holding companies even had their own currency in leather and their own shops in the market which sold against this leather currency—tenants thus being forced to buy from these shops when they were paid in this leather currency. Moreover, if land was transferred from one lease-holder to another, the currency became useless. There was also evidence of the agents of companies behaving just like the other big landlords of the area and exacting *begar*, or free labour, goods and services from the villagers. Particularly obnoxious to the tenants was the practice of having to carry the company's share to their godowns free of charge, and at times being forced to store their own produce in company godowns. Produce was divided into two equal shares only after, as the governor described it, "considerable deductions in favour of the landlord have been made from the common heap". These "considerable deductions" were considerable indeed if we accept the estimate that as much as 16 seers were taken out of one maund (40 seers) of the common heap. The remaining 24 were divided into two, but this left the tenant with only 12 out of 40, that is, 30 per cent of the gross produce instead of 50 per cent as might appear from a superficial glance at the rent-rate. In addition, the tenants paid the entire water rate, which in the colonies was a heavy burden, equal to or even more than the land revenue. In other words, the leasing companies were no different from the big landlords of the surrounding villages who levied all manner of cesses on their tenants in addition to the already high half-share rent.

Though the movement began in the area of the leasing companies (for specific reasons as we shall see presently), it did spread later, especially in the post-war years, to the proper landlord areas of the districts of Montgomery and Multan. Therefore, it would be in order to discuss these big landlords as well, some of whom had got thousands of acres of land. They reportedly indulged in all kinds of feudal oppression and exploitation, for

example, *begar*, cesses of all kinds, cash payments by tenants on occasions of marriage and death in their own or the landlord's family. The tenants were generally so frightened that they would even refuse to give evidence in court cases against landlords for fear of retaliation. Caste oppression was added to the economic as the tenants generally belonged to the castes lower down in the caste hierarchy such as Odes, Rai-Sikhs, Kambohs or Kambojs, Baurias, etc., whereas the landlords were generally of the upper castes, whether Muslim, Hindu, or Sikh.[3]

In addition to the landlords or the lease-holders and their agents, the poor tenants had to bear the exactions of the lower rungs of the bureaucracy as well. Wadhawa Ram, a major leader of the area, himself a *patwari* before he resigned and joined the movement in 1939, recounts the manner in which the revenue and other officials expected to be and were looked after on their tours—free supplies by shopkeepers, free labour from the *kamins*, and bribes from the others. If a girl got married, the family had to pay Rs 50 as a gift to the officials. If anybody dared to defy, then the strict colony regulations about ventilators in houses and clean streets would be brought into play and false complaints filed on these counts. In fact, when Wadhawa Ram refused to comply with this general practice, he quickly got marked as a "Congress" *patwari*.[4]

Clearly, there was no dearth of issues on which protest might emerge. Surprisingly, what triggered off the protest, however, was rivalry between the leasing companies in the Nili Bar canal colony. In 1937, one of the big leasing companies, the British Cotton Growers' Association, popularly referred to as BCG Company, lost out in the competition for better land as other companies bid with higher tenders and got the leases. An enterprising agent of the BCG, Kali Dass, realizing that his only chance of securing good land for his company was to somehow get the tenders cancelled, went around the tenant villages and told them that if land was transferred to the new lessees, they would have to pay higher rents, etc. He convinced the tenants sufficiently to organize a deputation of 40 tenants led by Tikaya Ram to hold a demonstration before the residence of the Revenue Minister, Sir Sunder Singh Majithia, in Lahore. The minister heard their grievances, and asked the commissioner of Multan division to visit Burewala and investigate on the spot.

Meanwhile, it appears, the Punjab Kisan Committee (PKC) came to hear of the goings-on in the Nili Bar colony; and Baba Jwala Singh, the President

[3] The account in this and the preceding para is based on interviews with Wadhawa Ram and Chhaju Mal Vaid, and on Chhaju Mal Vaid's chapter on the 'Tenant Movement in Punjab' in Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, as well as on FR(2) February 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1938, and the letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 22 November 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss Eur. F.125/87.

[4] Interview with Wadhawa Ram.

of the PKC, accompanied by comrades Ram Singh Ghalamala and Waryam Singh, reached Burewala on 18 May 1937, two days before the scheduled visit of the commissioner, and contacted Baba Jalwant Singh, an old comrade now running an *artia's* or commission agent's shop in Arifwala to earn his living. Accompanied by him, they went to the affected villages and on 19 May held a representative tenant meeting in which the demands to be placed before the commissioner were formulated. When the commissioner came on the following day, there was a good turn-out of tenants, especially as Kali Dass had continued his mobilization of tenants asking them to come to see the commissioner and hear the Kisan Sabha leaders who were coming from Lahore. The demands presented to the commissioner—division of the crop on a 50:50 basis on the field, no illegal levies, fodder price to be paid by tenants not to exceed Rs 3, 2 annas per *kanal*—were accepted by him. At this, the representatives of the other companies expressed their inability to pay up the lease amounts and asked their *pattas* to be cancelled and the lands re-auctioned. In the re-auction, Kali Dass was able to secure the land of his choice for his company.[5]

The necessary catalyst had been provided for the expression of tenant discontent, no matter that the catalytic agent was the agent of one of the companies that exploited the tenants. As Marxists would say, sometimes the contradictions within the ruling classes can be used in favour of the exploited. The PKS had succeeded in gaining an entry-point into the *muzara* or tenant belt of west Punjab, and they were quick to push home the advantage.[6]

Early in 1938, there was again trouble when particularly high tenders were reported to have been made and the government was examining their probable effects. It appears that the Kisan Sabha activists got wind of this and mobilized many tenants who were to be evicted by the lessees to announce that they would refuse to deliver possession of land to new tenants.[7] There were reports that a large number of tenants, 40,000 according to one estimate, were on strike, and a deputation came to meet the revenue minister on 25 February.[8] The government acted with alacrity. It announced the fixation of maximum rents to be taken from tenants and the cancellation of tenders received, and also that it was calling for fresh tenders. Leases still current were to be dealt with on the same lines so far as maximum rent

[5] This and the preceding paragraph are based on interviews with Wadhawa Ram and Chhaju Mal Vaid and on Chhaju Mal Vaid's chapter on the "Tenant Movement in Punjab" in Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*.

[6] *The Tribune*, 16 December 1937, carried a report that Baba Jwala Singh and Comrade Mangal Singh Chahal are going to Montgomery Ilaqa to establish kisan committees, as part of the plan of socialist workers to tour the province.

[7] FR(2) February 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1938.

[8] *The Tribune*, 25 February 1938.

was concerned, the lease money being reduced by government accordingly. This would entail a considerable loss to provincial revenue.[9] In other words, after this government announcement, *legally*, the leasing companies in Nili Bar could no longer claim any rent higher than 50 per cent. This was a very significant victory for tenants, as we shall see soon, for the struggle now became one for the implementation and extension of this concession to other areas.

Following this victory, a number of conferences were organized in the area in the next few months to claim credit for the struggle and its gains and urge the tenants to join Kisan committees.[10] Along with this, the work of organization was being carried on in the villages as well. A report in May, for example, said that Comrade Ram Singh Ghalamala and Hazura Singh had succeeded in setting up 600 Kisan Sabhas in Nili Bar colony.[11] By June, another round of protest appeared to be in the making; this time other tenants in Montgomery District wanted the extension of the concessions given to the tenants in Nili Bar. The PKC activists, Ram Singh Ghalamala, Professor Jalwant Singh and Mangal Singh were in the forefront again; and there were strikes by the tenants.[12] Unrest continued intermittently in the whole area,[13] and came to a head again in October, this time in Khanewal sub-division of Multan District, where the targets of attack, ironically, included Kali Dass's BCG company. Tenants of 15 Chaks refused, under the leadership of the District Congress Committee and the District Kisan Committee, to pick cotton or sow the wheat crop. Their representatives went to Amritsar as well, and mobilization through conferences continued apace.[14] During this phase, Kali Dass was once picked up and locked in a house when he tried to intervene in some dispute in a village, but the village elders took pity on him when the youth had gone out to work in the fields and let him go.[15] There were also reports of strikes on the land of some absentee landlords in Khanewal; there was another strike involving 25,000 tenants against tender-holders in the Vihari Ilaqa in Multan

[9] FR(2) Februay 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1938.

[10] Conferences of which reports are available were held at Burewala on 6 March, at Harappa in district Montgomery on 14–15 March, at Montgomery on 17–18 April, at Haveli sometime at the end of May, and at Multan around the end of May. FR(l) March 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1938; *The Tribune*, 11 March 1938; FR(2) April 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1938; *The Tribune*, 17 May, 1 June and 3 July 1938.

[11] *The Tribune*, 17 May 1938; FR(2) May 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1938.

[12] FR(2) June 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1938; *The Tribune*, 3 July and 29 July 1938.

[13] FR(2) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1934.

[14] FR(1) and (2) October 1938, FR(1) and (2) November 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1938 and 18/11/1938; *The Tribune*, 10 and 13 October 1938; Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 22 November 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/87.

[15] Chhaju Mal Vaid, "Tenant Movement in Punjab", in Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, pp. 283–84.

District, which was settled only after the intervention of the colonization officer.[16]

It had obviously become clear to the government by now that once it had conceded the principle of half-share as maximum legal rent in one colony, and there was a popular demand for its extension, it could not but extend it to other areas. Nor could it intervene on the side of the lessees to secure them more than the legal rent in case the tenants refused to pay. Of course, it did not want to create the impression that it was succumbing to pressure from the Congress and the Communists, and this made it hesitate for some time; but once it saw that there was no way out, it took the necessary action.[17] Lessees were told to grant sub-tenants substantial reductions and corresponding reductions were made in rent charged by government from lessees. Any lessee who did not accept the new conditions would have to relinquish his lease. Further, the whole system of temporary leases was reviewed and found uneconomical "as the land has not only to support the sub-tenant (who in present conditions makes a bare subsistence), but also to provide the rent due to government and the middle man, lessee's, profits". The government decided, therefore, "to bring this system gradually to a close and, in spite of the present low value of the land, to dispose of considerably larger areas than hitherto either by auction or by settlement of permanent peasant colonists. In the meantime, such temporary leases as continue to be granted will be subject to a comparatively restricted maximum area in the case of each individual lessee".[18]

Inevitably, despite the wishes of the government, the concessions announced were "generally regarded as a triumph for the Congressmen who promoted the agitation".[19] The announcement of the concessions, therefore, after perhaps a temporary lull, led to an intensification of activity early in 1939. There were reports of a deputation of tenants reaching Lahore and seeking an interview with the premier, which he refused despite pressure from senior Congressmen.[20] There were reports that

[16] *The Tribune*, 14 November and 2 December 1938. In the dispute in the Vihari Ilaqa, the settlement reportedly occurred on terms very favourable to the tenants: (*a*) the charge of Rs 6 per *kanal* of fodder was reduced to Rs 3-2-0; (*b*) all extra cesses were stopped; (*c*) the picked cotton would be divided in the field itself.

[17] FR(1) November 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1938; Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 22 November 1938, *Linlithgow Papers,* Mss. Eur. F. 125/87.

[18] Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 22 November 1938, *Linlithgow Papers,* Mss. Eur. F. 125/87.

[19] Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 23–24 December 1938, *Ibid.*

[20] *The Tribune,* 8, 14, 15, 16 January 1939; FR(1) January 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1939. It is possible that this deputation came to seek clarifications about the provision in the government announcement which said that some of the colony land meant for temporary cultivation would be split into small lots "to suit lessees of slender means". It seems the Kisan Committee opposed this, though no satisfactory reason is given for its opposition in the official report, which only gives as the reason the fear that it would remove the grievance of the tenants. See

"rumours" were being spread that tenants would acquire occupancy rights if they stayed on the same plot for six years[21]—which was the system prevalent in other provinces where tenants-at-will automatically became occupancy tenants after the lapse of a specified number of years (unless they were evicted before that). Some landlords of Suchan Village who heard the "rumour" decided to evade the new law by exchanging the plots of their tenants. For the tenants, the landlords' action acted as the final proof of the truth of the rumour—why else would they shift them to new plots? This led to resistance on the part of the tenants and a retaliatory attack by the landlords and their *goondas* resulting in the death of one tenant and injuries to many others. This happened in the second half of February 1939.[22]

Predictably, this incident created a lot of feeling of anger and discontent, to which the kisan activists contributed, it seems, by advising the tenants to resist evictions with force. There were reports throughout March of disputes between tenants and lessees, attacks by landlords on tenant conferences and accusations of assault and on several occasions the police had to be sent out to the villages to prevent clashes.[23] Matters came to a head on 12 April when the colonization officer called in the police to assist him in the eviction of old tenants from certain land recently released to a new lessee in Chak No. 451. One of these tenants was Tikaya Ram, a tenant leader and general secretary of the Nili Bar Kisan Committee, which makes one wonder whether the choice of this village for the show of force by the authorities was entirely a coincidence. The tenants resisted, and 16 were arrested for obstruction. The next day, 100 tenants reached the land and began to plough it. They were declared an unlawful assembly and dispersed. Eighteen "ring leaders" were arrested. This was followed by a satyagraha till the 24 April in which daily parties of five came to court

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FR(2) February 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1939. Perhaps, this was a ploy to divide the tenants by offering the lure of direct lease to some of them and the Kisan Committee was able to see through this ploy. This impression is strengthened by the reference in the report on the deputation that one of their demands was for loans from the government. The loans could most likely be for paying the instalments for the lease of the land. See *The Tribune,* 14, 15 and 16 January 1939.

[21] According to the official report, the rumours were spread by the Kisan Committee. FR(2) February 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1939. Wadhawa Ram, however, in his interview, merely refers to the prevalence of such rumours.

[22] FR(2) February 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1939; Interview with Wadhawa Ram; Chhaju Mal Vaid, "Tenant Movement in Punjab" in Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle,* p. 284. Also see *The Tribune,* 7 February 1939.

[23] FR(1) March 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1939; *The Tribune,* 2 March 1939. There was also a Kisan Conference at Burewala on 25 and 26 March, at which reportedly several speakers indulged in abuse of the premier. FR(2) March 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1939. Unrest continued in early April. FR(1) April 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1939.

arrest. After the 24 April, it appears, overt resistance came to an end.[24] According to available evidence, the movement was then resumed only after the War.

The government succeeded in stamping out the resistance for the time being because it took extremely harsh measures. All the prominent activists were dealt with through arrests and internments and externments. Among these were Ram Singh Ghalamala, Professor Jalwant Singh, Jogender Singh Bhamber and Bachan Singh Gholia. The tenants arrested in the incidents described earlier were also given harsh sentences, at times of two-and-a-half years rigorous imprisonment.[25] Besides, through its prompt and firm action, the government made it clear that it was not yielding on the question of ejectment and, unlike in the case of the refusal to pay extra levies and do *begar*, etc., the tenants had no legal leg to stand upon, since the Punjab tenurial law did not grant occupancy right on the basis of length of possession. Only recently, the Assembly had thrown out a Bill introduced by the Congress leader Mian Iftikhar-ud-din which sought to introduce security of tenure for tenants-at-will.[26]

The question then arises: why was the Unionist government so firmly against any concession on the issue of security of tenure to tenants when it had rather easily conceded the principle of a limitation on rent in the case of lease-holders? The answer may be found in the difference between landlords and lease-holders. While the Unionist ministry could by no means go against the interests of the very class that it represented and in fact comprised—for that is what acceptance of security of tenure for tenants would mean—it could afford to place controls and curbs on and even gradually do away with the lease-holding companies, for its very political existence did not depend on them. Besides, these companies were legally tenants of the government and their terms of tenancy could be changed by an order of the government whereas if the government were to regulate the relations between landlords and tenants, it would have to bring about legislation for the purpose, which itself was a prolonged political process

[24] FR(2) April 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1939; *The Tribune,* 20 April 1939.

[25] FR(1) and (2) April 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1939; Chhaju Mal Vaid, "Tenant Movement in Punjab", in Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle,* p. 284.

[26] The Bill he introduced to amend the Punjab Tenancy Act of 1887 wanted to give security of tenure to tenants-at-will, those in occupancy for six years on 1 October 1938 were to get occupancy rights, rents were to be restricted to half the produce, land revenue and *abiana* to be paid by the landlord, no exactions to be levied on tenants except legitimate expenses directly relating to cultivation. Tenancy to be normally guaranteed for four years, and, in case of non-cultivation or non-payment of rent, to two years. The Bill was refused permission for introduction by 87 to 47 votes. *The Tribune,* 2 December 1938. Given the timing of the Bill, it is possible that it was the cause of the rumour about the six-year occupancy leading to occupancy rights. Some activists or others may have mentioned the *attempt* to make a law on these lines and this might then have got transformed into an actual law.

during which all kinds of interests expressed themselves in a variety of ways. In the case of the leasing companies, the only loss the government had to suffer was a monetary one. Many of these companies, besides, it seemed, were foreign-owned, and it is unlikely that any foreign company could afford to make much of a public noise by that time without raising a nationalist outcry.

Once the government had conceded the principle of limitation of rent in Nili Bar, it could not resist its extension to other colonies, *once the demand arose*. Simultaneously, once the tenants of the colonies knew that the government had conceded the legal principle in one case, it became easy to organize them to demand its extension to their areas. The legal status endowed on the demand gave it a legitimacy in popular consciousness and also the confidence that it was capable of being won. In other words, two essential ingredients of a successful struggle had been provided: belief in its legitimacy and the confidence that it had a reasonable chance of success. No doubt, the rapid spread of the movement across the colony area was also due to the fact that unlike the traditional landlords of western Punjab, who kept their tenants under control with the aid of kinship and religion and political and economic backwardness, the leasing companies had no such ties with their tenants. Therefore, the movement did not have to break down the initial wall of resistance normally built by traditional notions of loyalty to the person and family and kin of the landlord. Besides, these were all newly-settled colony areas, and even in the landlord-owned pockets, the tenants would be new settlers and would not have the kind of traditional linkages with their landlords that we are familiar with in the old landlord areas. Besides, when traditional landlords demanded and got extra levies on the occasion of marriages, deaths, births, etc., or otherwise, there was at least the notion of reciprocity involved, whereas in the case of the leasing companies, when their agents exacted *begar* or increased the share of produce, it was entirely one-sided and blatant and visible exploitation. All these factors made it possible to build, in rather a short period of time, a pretty extensive and powerful movement among the tenants of the colony areas. Once this firm base was established, the task of extending it to the landlord areas, which was performed after the War, became easier.

The Nili Bar-Montgomery-Multan tenants' struggle also brings out clearly the role of the activists of the PKS and the Congress. Almost the entire task of organization and mobilization, of leadership, was performed by workers specially sent for the purpose from central Punjab.[27] In other words, the

[27] Interviews with Bhagat Singh Bilga, Harkishen Singh Surjeet and Dalip Singh Jauhal. Surjeet says that after the formation of the PKC, "we realised that you can't spread the movement unless you take up issues affecting the poor. It was then that we began to take special cadre and allot them from central Punjab to west Punjab, especially Montgomery and Multan areas".

movement in the colonies became possible only because the strength of the movement in central Punjab could be harnessed for its purposes. To accept this fact neither minimizes the role of the tenants themselves or of activists who gradually emerged from among the tenants such as Wadhawa Ram and Tikaya Ram, nor does it reduce the role of the other factors that we have discussed earlier in the building up of the movement. For a cadre to emerge from within such a rack-rented and backward group is no easy process; while that process takes its course the movement can only be continued by the already-conscious and trained elements, who are inevitably "outsiders".

The relative ease of the spread of the movement is also explained by the fact that the tenants of these areas were mostly Rai-Sikh and Kamboh settlers from the central districts who had some acquaintance with and felt the impact of the political movements of their home districts. They were quite different from the typical Muslim tenant of western Punjab who had been carefully protected from any outside influence. To mobilize them into political action was therefore not so difficult as it would have been if the tenants were Muslim. The significance of this fact is recognized by all the Kisan leaders familiar with the movement.[28]

United Front in Action: Amritsar, 1938

The district of Amritsar occupied an enviable position in the annals of the struggle for freedom in Punjab. Jallianwala Bagh had already immortalized it in 1919. The Akali Movement, too, fought many of its biggest battles within its borders, both in Amritsar City and in the *dehat*. Both city and countryside had participated fully in the Civil Disobedience Movement. Kisan activists had made the area a major base, with the Kirtis and the CPI group, as well as the Socialists, all represented in good measure. It was the home district of Ghadri babas, Sohan Singh Bhakna and Jwala Singh, of Sohan Singh Josh, Munshi Ahmad Din, Dr Kitchlew and Dr Satyapal, Udham Singh Nagoke and Pratap Singh Kairon. Thus, the Congress, the Akalis, the Communists (CPI and Kirtis) and Socialists all had a significant political presence in the district. As a consequence, it was a highly politicized area with a strong anti-imperialist tradition.[29] Little wonder, then, that the movement that I am about to describe was a joint effort by all the

[28] For example, interviews with Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, Chhaju Mal Vaid and Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

[29] This revolutionary tradition was very much a part of the consciousness of the political activists. For example, interview with Jagbir Singh Chhina, a nephew of Achhar Singh Chhina, who was a very young activist in the late 1930s and 1940s. The pride with which he recounts the anti-imperialist tradition of his district is striking indeed.

different political groups and was able to arouse an unprecedented (for the Kisan movement) degree of popular support from non-peasant sections of the population. I am referring, of course, to the Amritsar Kisan Morcha or Amritsar Bandobast Morcha or Uche Pul da Morcha or Bhandari Pul da Morcha, as it was variously described, which was launched on 20 July 1938. But, before I begin the story of the Morcha, a little dip into the previous few months to chart the build-up to the grand event.

In January, a vigorous campaign for the release of political prisoners was launched in Punjab, along with the rest of the country. Amritsar District was in the forefront of the campaign, with any number of village meetings and collection of thousands of signatures on petitions demanding the release. Political prisoners in Punjab jails, including the Andaman repatriates, were on hunger-strike and there was considerable anxiety about their condition. In Jullundur district, in Ferozepore and Amritsar, public meetings and rallies demanding release were held. On 24 January a huge public meeting was held in Lahore in the morning, which was joined by students who left their classes *en masse*; another one was held in the afternoon, and then a procession half a mile long wound its way to the Assembly Chamber. On being stopped by the police, the processionists sat down, shouted slogans and performed "*siapa*" or mock mourning. This was reported to be witnessed by about 50,000 people. At 6.30 pm when the Assembly session was over, the procession was allowed to proceed to the Assembly Chamber. It then returned to the city and ended in another big public meeting. Congress Socialists, Ghadarites and Communists were the most active in the organization and mobilization of this movement. In early February, big processions were taken out in Amritsar and Jullundur as well. Amritsar peasants had been active participants in this campaign by way of contributing signatures, participating in public meetings and sending *jathas* to the big demonstrations.[30]

The next important "happening" was a violent clash in Fatehwal.[31] It seems that for some time there had been attempts by pro-government elements instigated by the police to disrupt meetings held by the Congress in Ajnala Tehsil. Attempts were being made to use the local Muslim inhabitants in this game. Villagers who gave facilities to nationalists were being

[30] See *The Tribune*, 19, 20, 22, 23, 25 and 26 January, 5, 8 and 18 February 1938; FR(2) January 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1938.

[31] The account of the Fatehwal incident in this and the next two paragraphs is put together from the following sources:
FR(1) April 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1938; Letters from H.W. Emerson, Governor, Punjab to Lord Linlithgow, Viceroy, India, dated 17 March and 5 April 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86; Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina, Joginder Singh Chhina, Dalip Singh Jauhal, all kisan activists of that period in Amritsar who were present on the spot, and with Karam Singh Mann, who was deeply involved in the legal defence of the accused.

intimidated. One such incident had occurred in Fatehwal Village where a Congress meeting being addressed by Gopi Chand Bhargava, a senior Gandhian Congress leader, was disrupted and Bhargava insulted. The political workers of the area, it appears, decided that they must go back to Fatehwal and hold a meeting there, otherwise the pro-government elements would get a big boost and would continue to disrupt meetings. They sought the help of Achhar Singh Chhina, the famous Communist leader, who had just been released from internment in his village Harsha Chhina. The Congressmen then went in large members to the proposed meeting at Fatehwal. The opponents were also well-prepared and the meeting was surrounded by *badmashes*, who reportedly planned to cut the ropes of the pandal and let it collapse on the meeting. The Congress workers decided to defend themselves, and in the melee, two men of the opponents got killed.

Joginder Singh Chhina, one of the young Kirti workers who was given a life sentence for his alleged role in this incident, maintained in his interview to the author given 47 years after the event that they had absolutely no intention of attacking, leave alone killing, the disruptors since they were very conscious that if any such thing happened they would be rounded up and their political work would suffer. They had collected sticks, but only to defend themselves. Nevertheless, the fact that two of the pro-government men were killed, gave the police an opportunity to order a general round up of political workers. Thirty-nine people were arrested. The Congress immediately moved an adjournment motion in the Assembly. The Fatehwal case carried on for three years; Jawaharlal Nehru was President of the Defence Committee, and Dr Kitchlew, the Congress leader and Karam Singh Mann, who belonged to the CPI group, both lawyers, were actively involved in the defence. Achhar Singh Chhina, one of the accused, went underground and escaped to Russia. Joginder Singh Chhina too was caught only after he had been underground for two years. The Defence Committee fought the case till the High Court and succeeded in getting everyone released in 1941.

The Fatehwal case remained in the headlines for months to come and contributed to the general anti-government atmosphere in a big way. "The attention of the whole of the Punjab was riveted on this case", recalls Karam Singh Mann, who spent three years almost entirely on this case. He also points out that it cemented relations between the Communists and the Congress, since all were in it together, and the Congressmen involved in the case stood firm like a rock, thus earning the respect of the left wing.

For a few weeks, before the Morcha occupied the limelight, there was also a vigorous agitation on two issues—*malba* and remodelling of canal outlets on the Rayya distributary. The *malba* agitation was part of a wider Congress-led agitation which involved other districts as well, especially

Hoshiarpur and Ludhiana.[32] Opposition to *malba*—which was a cess collected on the land revenue in order to supposedly defray the common village expenses but which had degenerated into an expense account for visiting government officials—had been there for a long time; almost all meetings of peasants passed resolutions urging its abolition. It came to a head now because in the general anti-government atmosphere peasants were loath to pay for the expenses of those they saw as their oppressors. Besides, technically, *malba* had always been a voluntary charge, only collected along with the land revenue for convenience, and recently the revenue minister had made a public announcement in the Punjab Legislative Assembly, no doubt in response to the persistent agitation, that *malba* was not a legal charge, only a village common fund, and that its collection along with land revenue was not obligatory.[33] Taking their stand on this, Kisan Sabha workers in Amritsar District had gone around the villages holding numerous meetings at which they pointed out that collection of *malba* was illegal, and that it was spent on the entertainment of official visitors and revenue and police officers while it was shown in the accounts as "charity to lepers".[34]

Peasants began to refuse *malba*, and four of them were arrested for non-payment in village Lalpura. On this peasants from several villages in Tarn Taran *tehsil* wrote to the *tehsildar* of Tarn Taran that they were ready to pay land revenue but under no circumstances would they pay *malba* which was a voluntary tax. Udham Singh Nagoke interviewed the *tehsildar* and explained to him that *malba* was not a legal charge. A vigorous agitation was reported to be continuing on this issue in July.[35]

The other issue was that of the remodelling of canal outlets. The government maintained that the narrowing of outlets was necessary in order to reach more water to villages at the tail of the distributary whose supply had dwindled considerably.[36] Peasants argued that there was no reduction in the water rate, no increase in time for which water was given, only a reduction in the size of the outlets.[37] The agitation in Amritsar coincided with the protest in Lyallpur District on the same issue, which had been going on since May. I shall stop and briefly describe the situation in Lyallpur since it really became a joint agitation towards the end.

Peasants in various villages of Toba Tek Singh *Tehsil* had started refusing to take canal water as a protest against the remodelling and decrease in the

[32] FR(1) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938.
[33] *The Tribune*, 9 July 1938.
[34] *Ibid.*, 8 and 9 July 1938.
[35] FR(1) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938; *The Tribune*, 8 and 9 July 1938.
[36] For the government stand, see letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to the Viceroy, 8 July 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F.125/86; "Official Communique" published in *The Tribune*, 27 July 1938.
[37] *The Tribune*, 9 July 1938.

size of outlets, which, on government's own admission, now meant that water reached only 17 out of the 25 acres in a square of land. The protest was helped along by a strong Congress intervention by way of a big public meeting addressed by Virendra, the managing editor of the *Daily Pratap*, and Nawabzada Mahmud Ali, a Congressman who was a nephew of the premier and Giani Kartar Singh, the Akali leader, by village meetings by the District Congress Committee, and by a deputation of nationalist members of the district board to the deputy commissioner to intercede on behalf of the peasants. A big demonstration was held at the district headquarters on 10 June, to which 6 *jathas* ranging in size from 60 to 550 marched from different parts, the final gathering reaching 15,000, according to the usually conservative government estimate. Negotiations with the authorities ensued, but broke down.[38]

At the end of June, this agitation also spread to Amritsar District, and from both districts came reports of organized and persistent refusal to take canal water. Lyallpur District Congress Committee gave a call for observing 15 July as Anti-Canal Day throughout the district; and the message was popularized through conferences and meetings, including one which Abdul Majid, the Communist leader, and Bibi Fatima came to address from Lahore and which was specially targeted at Muslim peasants. The Amritsar District Kisan Sabha gave a call for peasants in Amritsar to follow suit and thus 15 July 1938 was observed as an Anti-Canal Day on which no canal water was to be taken by anyone. The government reported that 50 villages in Lyallpur actually refused water on that day, but it also admitted that there was a huge *bandobast* on the day by the police and canal staff, and arrests were also made. The Congress moved an adjournment motion in the Assembly.[39]

In Amritsar, the agitation over *malba* and the re-modelling of canal outlets flowed straight into the Amritsar Kisan Morcha started on July 20. Though this *morcha* was launched by the Amritsar Bandobast (Settlement) Committee, it was not meant as a protest only against the reported increase in revenue at the settlement. The Gurumukhi poster that appeared in Amritsar on 12 July announcing the demonstration in fact clearly listed among the grievances the fact that "the canal outlets of a number of villages had been reduced and that the peasants were groaning under the burden of *malba*, *chowkidara*, *chahi* and local rates". Of course, it also alleged that the settlement officer had announced an addition of Rs 0.4 million per

[38] FR(2) May 1938 and FR(1) June 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1938 and 18/6/1938; Letters from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab, to Viceroy, dated 24 June and 8 July 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86; and *The Tribune*, 5, 8, 21, 25 and 27 May, 2, 16, 17 and 22 June 1938. The governor in his letters cited here admitted the justice of the peasants' complaint.

[39] FR(2) June 1938, FR(1) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1938, and 18/7/1938; Letters from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 22 July and 9 August 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86; *The Tribune*, 3 and 19 July 1938 for Lyallpur and 5, 8 and 9 July 1938 for Amritsar.

annum to the land revenue of the district.[40] In other words, the demonstration on 20 July called by the Amritsar Bandobast Committee was designed as an expression of a multitude of peasant grievances. It ended up as an expression of the strong anti-government—both anti-British and anti-Unionist—sentiment in the district.

The Amritsar Bandobast Committee had been formed as early as June 1936 soon after Nehru's visit to Sarhali in anticipation of the commencement of the settlement operations in autumn of that year. The government, if we recall, had expressed apprehensions about the effect of Jawaharlal's visits on the smooth working of the settlement.[41] In fact, if we go a little further back, we would recall that in 1929–30 there has been an agitation against the settlement of the district which had succeeded in getting it postponed for five years.[42] In 1937 as well, the Amritsar Bandobast Committee, a body which included Akali, Congress and left-wing elements, had been very active in organizational and propaganda work among peasants. It had organized the Amritsar Bandobast Conference at Nowshera Punnuan in late September 1937, to which Jayaprakash Narayan had been invited.[43] From the beginning of 1938 as well, there were reports that the Bandobast Committee was active in organizing conferences and meetings. Around February, there appears to have been some sort of split between the Akalis and the Communists, and the Akalis had formed a separate Bandobast Committee. The Akalis, it seems, were perturbed about the effects of the Communist attitude to religion on the Sikh masses.[44] However, this does not seem to have led to any very serious rift as all of them were able to come together again for the conduct of the Morcha in July 1938.

The Bandobast Committee had called for a huge demonstration on 20 July at Amritsar in the Civil Lines outside the canal and settlement offices and the houses of the revenue minister and deputy commissioner.[45] The

[40] A report on the demonstration of 20 July prepared in the Secretariat, sent as an enclosure with the letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to the Viceroy, dated 22 July 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86.

[41] See FR(1) June 1936, *H.P.* F.18/6/1936; and *H.P.* F. 4/14/1936.

[42] See Chapter 3.

[43] See Chapter 4.

[44] FR(2) February 1938, FR(2) March 1938, FR(1) June 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1938, 18/3/1938, 18/6/1938; *The Tribune*, 4 and 10 March 1938.

[45] The account of the demonstration and the *lathi*-charge, etc., in this and the next paragraph is based on the following:

Reports filed by the correspondents of *The Tribune* and the Associated Press on the incident in *The Tribune*, 21 July 1938; statement of Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, MLA, General Secretary of Amritsar Bandobast Committee, published in *The Tribune*, 22 July 1938; FR(2) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938; interviews with Dalip Singh Jauhal, Ram Singh Majitha, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, Balwant Singh Azad, Dalip Singh Tapiala, all participants in the event; and the enclosure with letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to the Viceroy, dated 22 July 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86.

District Kisan Committee and the District Congress Committee had supported the call and on 20 July thousands of peasants began to pour into Amritsar. By afternoon, a mammoth meeting was in progress in Jallianwala Bagh, which all anti-imperialist forces in Punjab had helped to make into a living memorial to nationalism by making it the venue of an unending stream of political gatherings. Meanwhile, on 19 July, the administration had brought Section 144 into force in the area of the city north of the Lahore–Delhi railway line in which the Civil Lines lay. The demonstration in the Civil Lines was thus made impossible. At the meeting, therefore, a call was given for volunteers to defy the ban and about 300 men representing the Bandobast Committee and the Kisan Committee and drawn from different villages were formed into a *jatha*. This *jatha*, led by Udham Singh Nagoke, the nationalist Akali leader who had been most active among the peasants of Amritsar, and accompanied by other leaders such as Harnam Singh Kasel, Sohan Singh Josh and Bibi Raghbir Kaur, as well as a crowd of at least 5000–6000 peasants and several thousand other sympathizers, marched through the Hall Bazaar amid scenes of tremendous enthusiasm on the part of the spectators. The *jatha* carried flags with the hammer and sickle, Congress flags and revolutionary placards as well as an effigy of "*malba*", which was later burnt. It also shouted slogans against the Unionist ministry.

When the *jatha* reached the railway overbridge which led into the prohibited area, about half the *jatha* was allowed to cross over before the district magistrate's warning was read out. Udham Singh Nagoke replied that they were only going to present their grievances since other attempts had proved useless. The *jatha* continued to move forward. The City Magistrate, Muhammad Shafi, then ordered a *lathi*-charge, at which about 100 police constables fell upon the crowd with their *lathis*. The processionists immediately sat down on the ground and then lay on each other, exposing their backs to the *lathis* of the police. The police then proceeded to drag and push them to get them out of the way. The *lathi*-charge, which was generally described as very severe, and the use of mounted police to push back the crowd led to several older members of the *jatha* falling unconscious and Udham Singh Nagoke himself was badly injured in the eye and lay bleeding. In all, about 300 people were seriously injured. While a few were arrested, the rest, including many of the injured, were either taken and dumped at far-off places in police vans and lorries, or left to be cared for by Seva Samiti volunteers.

The next day, the Congress MLAs created such a furore in the Punjab Legislative Assembly at Simla that the premier had to promise to inquire into the *lathi*-charge. The adjournment motion was moved by Sardar Harjap Singh, the well-known Communist, now a Congress MLA. Impassioned speeches were made by Sohan Singh Josh, Bibi Raghbir Kaur and Pratap

Singh Kairon who gave eye-witness accounts of the *lathi*-charge and produced broken iron-shod pieces of *lathis* as proof of their charges.[46]

The people of Amritsar responded as if the challenge had been thrown to all of them. As the newspapers pointed out, the spot at which the *lathi*-charge took place was the very same at which the crowd that was going to demand the release of Dr Satyapal and Dr Kitchlew in April 1919 was fired upon[47]—the incident which triggered off the chain of events leading to the Jallianwala Bagh massacre. In fact, something of the spirit of 1919 and of the Akali *jathas* appears to have come alive in those days in the city. The same evening as the *lathi*-charge on the *jatha*, a huge public meeting was held at Jallianwala Bagh, which was attended by 6,000 people according to the government estimate, and at which "violent" speeches were made.[48] The next day, two public meetings were held in the same hallowed surroundings, one in the afternoon addressed by the Congress stalwart of Amritsar, Dr Saifuddin Kitchlew, and another one again in the evening. On 21 July the entire bazaar went on hartal, including Katra Ahluwalia, comprising the various cloth markets, Guru Bazaar, Nimak Mandi, the grain and bullion markets, as also the two *satta* chambers. In the evening, a huge crowd of thousands assembled to support the *jatha* sent by the War Council to defy Section 144. It got restive and suffered a number of *lathi*-charges.[49] On July 23, 11 Congress members of the City Municipal Committee walked out when the president did not allow an adjournment motion on the subject. Workers' organizations offered to contribute a *jatha* to the satyagraha.[50]

Public meetings continued to be held at brief intervals. One was held on 22 July—a joint one by the City and District Congress Committees, the District Kisan and Socialist parties and the Hosiery Workmen's Association in Mandi Kesarganj. The meeting was preceded by a procession.[51] Another one was held at the Jallianwala Bagh on the 28 July, addressed by Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, MLA and Secretary of the Bandobast Committee, and Sohan Singh Josh.[52] More meetings were held at Jallianwala Bagh on 29 July, 2 August, 4 August, and two on 5 August—one at Jallianwala Bagh and the other at Nimak Mandi Chowk.[53] It is very possible that our list is incomplete.

46 *The Tribune*, 22 July 1938.

47 Report by the Tribune correspondent on the demonstration of 20 July, *The Tribune*, 21 July 1938.

48 FR(2) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938.

49 *The Tribune*, 22 July 1938.

50 *The Tribune*, 24 July and 30 July 1938.

51 *The Tribune*, 23 July 1938.

52 *The Tribune*, 29 July 1938.

53 *The Tribune*, 30 July, 3, 5 and 6 August 1938.

Outside the city as well, support was forthcoming. Meetings were held in many villages and many Ilaqas sent their *jathas* to participate in the daily programme of courting of arrest that continued till 9 August. From Jullundur and Lahore came offers of *jathas*.[54] Swami Sahajanand and N.G. Ranga issued statements of support.[55] *The Tribune* wrote an editorial condemning the *lathi*-charge as unnecessarily severe, questioning the right of the Unionist government to be called either a "zamindar" government or a "popular" government.[56] The Akali Dal Executive Committee, of which Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon was a member, condemned the *lathi*-charge and expressed sympathy with the peasants in their demands.[57]

Meanwhile, the organizers of the Morcha had immediately formed themselves into a War Council, which was re-cast after a couple of days to include the Kisan Committee, that is, the left-wing activists. This War Council decided to continue to send daily *jathas* of roughly 25 men to defy the prohibitory orders. Everyday, a *jatha* would go, and usually the leader would be arrested and the rest dumped many miles away from the city. Soon *jathas* representing different rural Ilaqas began coming in to offer arrest. After a few days, the government began to arrest the organizers—the War Council was then dissolved and a dictator appointed. More arrests and raids followed: in Jallianwala Bagh, at the Punjab Kisan Committee and District Kisan Committee offices, and of Comrade Yog Raj in his village in Lahore District for a speech at Jallianwala Bagh. Many of the leaders who were arrested in the *jathas* were brought to trial and asked to give bail which they refused, preferring to serve their sentences. At one time, in between, there were also reports of negotiations with the officials, and a *jatha* of red-flag waving students was even allowed to go to the deputy commissioner's residence, followed some days later by a *jatha* of peasants; but nothing came of these moves.[58]

On 9 and 10 August, the premier and Chhotu Ram were visiting the district. On the morning of 9 August, a *jatha* of 62 men was permitted to cross over into the Civil Lines area. They selected 10 representatives who then met the deputy commissioner and presented their grievances, which he promised to look into. They were also told the premier would meet them the next day. According to the pre-arranged plan, the deputy commissioner handed them a copy of his order cancelling the imposition of Section 144 in the area. This was a result of the negotiations that had been carried on to be

[54] *The Tribune*, 28 July, 31 July, 2, 3 and 5 August 1938.

[55] FR(2) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938; *The Tribune*, 24 July and 6 August 1938.

[56] *The Tribune*, 22 July 1938.

[57] *The Tribune*, 6 August 1938.

[58] FR(2) July and FR(1) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938 and 18/8/1938; *The Tribune*, 21, 22, 23, 24, 26, 27, 28, 29, 30 and 31 July, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7 and 9 August 1938; interviews with Dalip Singh Jauhal, Ram Singh Majitha and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

able to present a solution before the premier's visit. The Morcha was then withdrawn.[59]

It appears that release of political prisoners was not part of the agreement, because most of them were released after serving their full sentences. Udham Singh Nagoke and Darshan Singh Pheruman, for example, were released only in February 1939, when the High Court reduced their sentence from one year to six months. Baba Sohan Singh Bhakna and Baba Karam Singh Cheema were also released only in March 1939; and Santa Singh Gandiwind, another major leader, was asking for bail as late as April 1939.[60]

On the face of it, it can be argued that the Morcha did not achieve anything. The government did not concede any of its demands; it did not even release the prisoners. It only withdrew Section 144. To accept this line of argument would be to ignore the politicizing impact the Morcha had on the peasants and other sections of the society who participated in, sympathized with, or even just observed its course. It also means ignoring the fact that movements are about more than their immediate demands. The basic objective of political movements of the time we are studying was to create and promote and advance a generalized political awareness and support which would secure the achievement of their political objectives in the long run, and not merely the satisfaction of some immediate, short-term demands. Their impact, too, therefore, has to be judged by these criteria. Gandhiji announced Swaraj in one year in 1920. It was not achieved till 1947. Does that mean that Non-Cooperation, Civil Disobedience and Quit India were failures? In fact, it seems to us that the Amritsar Bandobast Morcha succeeded in garnering a degree of popular support from other sections of society which no other peasant struggle of the time succeeded in getting in the province. This was true even in comparison with the Lahore Kisan Morcha in 1939 in which 5,000 went to jail whereas in the Amritsar Morcha only 145 were arrested.

Of course, much of the explanation for the large success and impact of the Morcha lies in the fact that it was supported by all the anti-imperialist forces—the Akalis, the Congress, Socialists and Communists. It was a good example of what a genuine united front, or unified struggle could achieve. Obviously, it was not possible to get the whole of the Amritsar market to down its shutters unless the support of the Congress, which commanded the allegiance of the Hindu merchants, was there. Again, the Amritsar Morcha was special in this respect for this kind of united action was not to be found in the Lahore Morcha or in the colony tenants' struggle. In Montgomery and Multan, the Kisan Committee activists were able to use some

[59] *The Tribune*, 10 August 1938 and FR(1) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1938.

[60] For release of participants, See *The Tribune*, 28 August, 7 November 1938, 1 and 4 March and 23 Apri1 1939.

Congress contacts, and also the Congress name, because whether they said so or not, the people thought that since they were anti-government they must be Congressmen. But neither Congress nor Akalis had any significant base in the area which could bring to the movement the kind of benefits united action brought in Amritsar. Communists might at times be tempted to believe that the real strength behind the Morcha was theirs since it is probably true that after the initial few days much of the organizational control, the bringing of *jathas* for arrest, etc., was in their hands. But it would be difficult to deny that the Morcha could not have got the attention it did—in the press, in the Assembly, among the non-left sections of the public (who were the majority)[61]—if it was a purely Communist affair.

The form of struggle employed by the Morcha—non-violent resistance to repression by stoically bearing violence—was the same as that employed by the Akali *jathas* in the Gurdwara Reform Movement and by the national movement as a whole. Its continuing effectiveness was shown by the manner in which the use of force on an unarmed, non-violent, non-resisting crowd aroused popular anger and sympathy. The thousands of citizens of Amritsar who poured out in the first few days to accompany the *jathas*, to attend the public meetings, even bear *lathi*-charges, were no doubt showing their solidarity with the victims and anger at their oppressors.

The Morcha also undoubtedly lowered the prestige of the Unionist ministry and brought into question its image as a pro-peasant government. A government that ordered such a brutal *lathi*-charge on and arrested peasants and their leaders (who merely wanted to present their grievances to the authorities) without even the excuse of provocation by way of violence on their part: this was the image its opponents would now be able to build up with some credibility. The Unionists were no doubt conscious of this, therefore the agreement with the Morcha leaders was made to coincide with the visit of the premier and Chhotu Ram to the district, so that the damage could be restored. That this dent in their image occurred at a time when otherwise they were riding high on the basis of the passing of the agrarian legislation (as we shall soon discover) was important in itself.

One might add that it appears also that the leaders of the agitation were able to secure the successful termination of the Morcha with a formal settlement before its strength and public interest began to perceptibly wane. This was very important because, as was shown by the case of the Lahore Kisan Morcha later, unless a proper occasion was found for its termination, a *morcha* could go on and on meaninglessly and then just fizzle out. Perhaps

[61] Ram Singh Majitha, Secretary of the Amritsar District Kisan Committee at that time, recounts in his interview that his old father, a veteran of Guru ka Bagh Morcha who served a jail sentence in that struggle, came to the 20 July demonstration and was even injured in the *lathi*-charge. Would he have come if the Akalis had not given the call?

Sohan Singh Josh and Pratap Singh Kairon, the two leaders who appear to have been deeply involved in the negotiations with the authorities,[62] were able to see that the premier's proposed visit presented an opportunity for settlement which might not come their way again in a hurry, and they were able to conclude an honourable truce. The parallel from the national movement that comes to mind is the negotiations between the nationalists and the government in December 1921 when the government was keen to ensure a proper atmosphere for the Prince of Wales' visit. The negotiations failed, however, and after this Gandhiji could not secure any settlement and had to therefore unilaterally withdraw the movement on the ground of violence in Chauri Chaura.

The Unionist Counter-Offensive

Before we resume the saga of "*morchas*" and "*jathas*" and "*jathebandi*", we need to turn our attention to some important developments which, though not strictly a part of the story of peasant resistance, had a profound impact on it. We are referring to the massive controversy that erupted when the Unionist ministry brought forth a whole series of legislative measures, designed to bring about debt relief, in the summer of 1938. Four Bills were introduced in June and three of them were passed by the Punjab Legislative Assembly in July 1938 within a matter of days. Appeals by some members that the Bills be circulated for opinion were brushed aside and they were rushed through select committees and passed within a month of their introduction.[63] The manner and speed of their passage indicated the political mileage the Unionists expected to derive from them—an expectation that was not without basis, as shown by later events.

First, a few words about the legislation itself. The Restitution of Mortgaged Lands Bill made provision for return to the debtors of all land mortgaged before 1901, when the Land Alienation Act came into force. The Alienation of Land (Further Amendment) Bill declared null and void all *benami* transactions where members of non-agriculturist castes bought the land of their debtors in the name of their "agriculturist" friends. The Registration of Moneylenders Bill was intended to make restrictions on moneylending business stricter still by restoring some provisions of an earlier bill that had been knocked down by the courts. The Agricultural Produce Markets Bill sought to regulate conditions in markets and reduce the middleman's profits and secure higher prices to the agriculturists. The consideration of this last

[62] See FR(1) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1938.

[63] FR(2) June 1938, FR(l) and (2) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1938, 18/7/1938; Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 7 June, 8 July and 22 July 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 12/86; *The Tribune*, 19, 23, 26 June, 7 July 1938.

bill was postponed to a future date.[64] The great political advantage of all these pieces of legislation was that they could be used to establish the pro-peasant credentials of the Unionist ministry without in any way hurting the interests of the class whose interests the ministry represented: the big landlords as well as the rich peasants-cum-agriculturist moneylenders. It is necessary to point out here that tenancy legislation of even the most rudimentary kind was never conceived of by the Unionist ministry, and attempts by others to do so were defeated.[65] Unionists were very fond of comparing their legislation to that undertaken by their contemporary Congress ministries, but they forgot that Congress ministries for the most part brought forth legislation which attacked the rights and privileges of both moneylenders and landlords.[66]

The merits of the legislative measures need not detain us here, except to say that while undoubtedly they left untouched the agriculturist moneylenders and did not even remotely concern the system of landlordism based on rack-renting, etc., they did look as if they were going to be of some benefit to the ordinary peasant cultivator by protecting him from the rapacity of the non-agriculturist moneylender. Again, it is another matter that later enquiries showed that their implementation was tardy indeed and that credit was severely restricted as a result and that it was only the intervention of the War and accompanying high prices that led to a widespread redemption of mortgages by people re-mortgaging smaller pieces of land for the same amount. The fact of the matter is that even if one peasant in a village were to get back his mortgaged land because of a piece of legislation, the political effect of that on the entire village would be tremendous.

The introduction of these legislative measures by the Unionist ministry put the Congress in a serious bind. For a number of reasons, it found itself hesitant to support the Bills. One, it was politically opposed to the Unionist Ministry because it was a loyalist, pro-British Ministry. Two, it had many genuine criticisms of the Bills, such as the exclusion of agriculturist moneylenders from their scope, their harmful effect on credit, etc. Three, and this became the most important, a very large proportion of Congress MLAs were elected from urban areas and, given the way the system of separate electorates worked, their constituents were primarily non-agriculturist or urban Hindus who were the main targets of this legislation. As Harkishen

[64] Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 7 June 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86.

[65] See footnote 27 of this chapter for the Congress leader Mian Iftikhar-ud-din's attempt to introduce a Tenancy Bill later in the year, which was defeated by majority vote.

[66] Kishori Mohan Patra, "The First Congress Ministries: Problems and Prospects (1937–39)", in *A Centenary History of the Indian National Congress*, 3 Vols., B.N. Pande, general editor, New Delhi, 1985, Vol. III.

Singh Surjeet explained to us in his interview, the Congress leaders hesitated to support the legislation not because they themselves were usurers but because they came from constituencies dominated by the trading community; they did not want to lose their votes. The proof of this, he said, was that "they never stopped us (rural-based Congressmen) from raising the issue of indebtedness", "they did not mind us going to our voters with these issues—but they did not want to take a stand which would put them in the wrong in their own constituencies".[67]

Nevertheless, despite this strong resistance from the Punjab Congress Party to the Bills, the Congress high command, perceiving that there was no way they could be seen to be against the bills, virtually ordered the Punjab Congress Legislature Party to vote for the bills. Mahmud Ali and Harkishen Singh Surjeet were among the group of radical Congressmen who went to Maulana Azad and brought a letter carrying these instructions.[68] There were also reports of telegraphic orders.[69] In the end, the Congress was divided on the issue. The rural-based MLAs, who were very few, voted for the Bills, and the urban-based MLAs remained neutral. The only exception, it seems, was Sri Ram Sharma, who officially represented south-eastern towns, but had a solid peasant base in the Rohtak area, who voted for the Bills.[70]

Meanwhile, there were strong public protests against the bills by the non-agriculturists who formed themselves into associations for the purpose and collected money, threatened satyagraha and held hartals in town after town.[71] The Congress stand of neutrality, of qualified support, also

[67] Also interviews with Karam Singh Mann, Master Hari Singh, Bhagat Singh Bilga, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, Balwant Singh Azad, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Sri Ram Sharma; *The Tribune*, 13, 29, 30 July, 13 August, 7 September 1938; Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 8 July 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/ 86.

[68] Harkishen Singh Surjeet, interview. Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, p. 234.

[69] The governor reported to the viceroy that an Intelligence Department official had told him that Dr Gopi Chand had received a telegram from Abul Kalam Azad saying, "Hope you have decided to vote for Bills according to my instructions". To which the reply had been sent: "Your orders will be obeyed. Permit me to resign from the Assembly. Cannot lead the Party". Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, 22 July 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86. Also see Supplement to FR(1) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938, which says that the All-India Congress Working Committee directed the Punjab Congress Parliamentary Party to support agrarian legislation in pursuance of the policy of supporting all pro-people measures.

[70] Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 8 July 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/86; FR(2) July 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938; interviews with Sri Ram Sharma, Chhaju Mal Vaid, Harkishen Singh Surjeet and Master Hari Singh.

[71] The protests were too numerous to list here. See *The Tribune*, 9, 10, 13, 31 July, 2 August 1938; FR(1) July 1938, FR(1) August 1938, FR(1) September 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938, 18/8/1938, 18/9/1938.

tended to get completely submerged by and identified with the non-agriculturist opposition, even though the Congress Party had given strict instructions that no Congressman should support any agitation against the Bills.[72] In the shrill tones of public debate, there was no room for ambiguity or subtlety. The Unionists called them Golden Bills. The non-agriculturists called them Black Bills. Few were willing to listen to those who said they were neither golden nor black, but copper.[73]

Having succeeded in putting the Congress on the defensive, Sikandar and Chhotu Ram took the battle from the legislative chamber to the public platform. The propaganda offensive that ensued was unprecedented in Unionist history. Even the governor, as we saw earlier, had been complaining that Unionist ministers did not do enough by way of counter-propaganda to the mobilization by the Congress and the Communists. Even in the elections of 1936–37, the Unionists, barring Chhotu Ram, were generally conspicuous by their low profile. However, persistent pressure from the governor and also Chhotu Ram had obviously done its job and Sikandar and several other ministers and MLAs set out with enthusiasm to publicly back the winning horse of agrarian legislation.

The reports speak for themselves: Chhotu Ram addressed audiences of 5,000 and 10,000 each in Nili Bar, while Zamindar Associations and Military Unions presented addresses.[74] Sikandar Hayat Khan addressed a crowd of 50,000 in Khalchian in Amritsar District, sat on a *manji* (string cot) with peasants, said he was the embodiment of political revolution, defended the Bills, was greeted by shouts of "Inqilab Zindabad". He held another meeting at Tarn Taran.[75] Sikandar and Chhotu Ram spoke to a 25,000-strong crowd in Ajnala in Amritsar District; criticized the demands of the Amritsar Bandobast Morcha; defended the Bills. Chhotu Ram shouted "Inqilab Zindabad" and "Zamindar Raj Zindabad" and the audience shouted with him.[76]

The high point in the drama that surrounded the whole affair was the holding of simultaneous conferences in Lyallpur at the beginning of September by the Unionists and the Congress.[77] The Unionists were represented in full strength at the Zamindara Conference, with Sikandar and Chhotu Ram in the lead. The Congress had called all the provincial luminaries to its

[72] See reports of the meeting of the Punjab Congress Working Council in *The Tribune*, 13 August 1938, and FR(1) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1938.

[73] This is Bhagat Singh Bilga's formulation (interview).

[74] *The Tribune*, 5 August 1938.

[75] *The Tribune*, 11 August 1938.

[76] *The Tribune*, 12 August 1938.

[77] The account of these two conferences in this and the next paragraph is based on the following: Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 6 September and a report by J.R. Scott, DIG, police, dated 5 September sent as an enclosure with a letter from Craik to the Viceroy, 8 September, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/87; FR(1) September 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1938; and *The Tribune*, 2, 4 and 5 September 1938.

Kisan Conference, but had added on Bhulabhai Desai, the leader of the Congress in the Central Legislative Assembly, for extra measure. The Zamindara Conference, which had the full support of the official machinery, was a grand affair, with a huge colourfully-decorated pandal, whereas the Kisan Conference in contrast was a study in simplicity. Sikandar was welcomed with the fluttering of Union Jacks, the Congress procession had the tricolour at its head. The Unionists attacked the Congress for betraying its own election manifesto, the Congress called the Unionists pro-imperialist and pro-feudal. This time it was Chhotu Ram who said "I am Inqilab personified", and called the Congress conference a "Baniani Conference" (conference of *banias* or traders). Sikandar declared the agrarian Bills as the first step towards *inqilab*. The Kisan Conference criticized the Unionists for not doing anything for the tenants. The Zamindara Conference accordingly passed a resolution asking the government and the zamindars to remove all the legitimate grievances of tenants, *kamins* and Scheduled Castes. The Kisan Conference declared the Bills as inadequate and as not satisfying the needs of the poor peasants, and also introducing a measure of discrimination towards non-agriculturists. It passed resolutions of no-confidence in the Unionist ministry, declaring that it had done nothing to reform the land revenue system to make it less harsh on the ordinary peasant. The Zamindara Conference also passed a resolution asking for the taxation of rural incomes on the same basis as non-agriculturists were taxed. Unlike the Kisan Conference, it expressed full confidence in the Unionist ministry.

According to official estimates, the peasants showed their preference clearly by flocking to the Zamindara Conference in unprecedented numbers, at one stage reaching Rs 0.15 million, whereas only 10,000–15,000 went to the Kisan Conference. *The Tribune*, on the other hand, described the Kisan Conference procession as a huge one with 50,000 people. Allowing for prejudice on both sides, it seems the Unionists had a decided edge.

In October, Sikandar and Chhotu Ram carried out a tour of 12 districts in three weeks, which included the southeast, central and northern districts. According to reports, the turn-out was substantial at all the public gatherings. In this tour, the emphasis shifted from simply defending the Bills to warnings against attempts to create dissensions between landlords and tenants and against those who were doing anti-recruitment propaganda, to appeals to form Zamindar Leagues, and references to other benefits bestowed by Unionists such as 60 per cent reservation for zamindars in subordinate judicial services. The tour was also used to announce remissions of land revenue and *abiana* and make offers of *taqavi* loans in the southeast where the rains had failed.[78]

[78] FR(l) and (2) October 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1938; *The Tribune*, 7 October 1938, for conference in Karnal, 8 October for Panipat and Rewari, 9 October for Rohtak, 12 October for Hoshiarpur, 25 October for Sialkot, etc.

The governor was exultant about the impact of these tours, as he had been about the ones in August and September. He reported to the Viceroy that:

> Sikandar told me that at every single place they had an extraordinarily enthusiastic reception.... There is no doubt that the prestige of the Ministry at the moment stands extremely high throughout the Province. This is largely, of course, due to their recent agrarian legislation and also in part to the very generous measures of relief taken to deal with the famine in Hissar and the neighbouring districts.... It is also, I think, largely due to the fact that the ministers are now devoting a great deal more of their time and energy to these propaganda tours, where they address huge audiences and find it comparatively easy to work up enthusiasm. Ever since I took over as Governor I have been impressing on them the necessity for more propaganda of this kind.... The prestige of the Congress, on the other hand, is still at an extremely low ebb.[79]

The peasant leaders whom we interviewed readily acknowledge the popularity of the agrarian legislation among peasants and the impact of the propaganda effort that went with it. Chain Singh Chain, the Secretary of the Jullundur District Kisan Committee around that time, says clearly: "The debt legislation was popular amongst the kisans.... Peasants felt that the legislation was good. As Congressmen, we criticized the political role of the Unionist Party. Peasants said, 'that may be so, but they have done this one good thing'". Karam Singh Mann said in the same refrain: "The people were not convinced that these were Black Bills. Our criticism was that these bills do not go far enough.... It was a wrong move on our part because it cut no ice with the people.... Chhotu Ram forced Sikandar to attend meetings. Chhotu Ram was a brave man. He would challenge us in our own stronghold of Jullundur. In Rurka Kalan he gave a speech and convinced even our own people. They started saying 'What is wrong with what he is saying?'" Dalip Singh Tapiala describes Chhotu Ram's style and how he got the people to listen to him. "His method of presentation was very strange. He would say: 'Our country is being looted by *banias*. One *bania* has come from 7000 miles away'. And the Deputy Commissioner would be sitting next to him. 'And a new *bania* has been born in India as well who is looting the kisans even more than the other *bania*.' And he would really be hitting at the Congress". Harkishen Singh Surjeet's description of Chhotu Ram confirms this: "Chhotu Ram had come to open a co-operative bank in Goraya and we had led a red flag demonstration against him. Chhotu Ram, however, at least for a while, succeeded in

[79] Letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to the Viceroy, 26 October 1938, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. 125/87.

turning the crowd against us by saying that he was not afraid of the red flag. He shouted the slogan 'Inqilab Zindabad' and made the officials do the same. He said, 'I am against the *banias*, and I will be very happy if Russia comes and does away with these *banias*. These *banias*, i.e., Congress, have turned the Communists against me, otherwise they are my brothers. They are raising the same slogan that I am raising: indebtedness of the peasantry'".[80]

We do not intend to suggest that with the agrarian legislation and the accompanying propaganda blitz the Unionists had successfully eroded the influence of the Congress and the left wing from among the peasants who were their supporters. What we are suggesting is that the Congress and the left-wing activists were not able to easily convince even their supporters that the legislation was grossly inadequate, and explain their own ambiguous position on the subject. Their arguments were too complicated to be an effective reply to the Unionist onslaught. The continuation of opposition to the bills in public even after they had been passed was particularly unwise, but then the Congress MLAs were under tremendous pressure from their constituents. The peasants' position was that the Bills were beneficial to some extent, and to that extent they were a good thing. That did not mean, as the peasant leaders clearly point out, that peasants who were anti-imperialist in their own political convictions now began to support the Unionists. They continued to remain opposed to them for political reasons, for their loyalism, for their stand on political prisoners for their stand on the anti-recruitment Bill. But it did mean that the rapid and smooth process of expansion of the peasant movement that was underway in 1938 was somewhat obstructed. A lot of attention now had to be given and was given to countering the propaganda of the Unionists, with meetings being held all along the route of the ministers' tours and usually around the same time.[81] In other words, the Unionist counter-offensive, for that is what it was, succeeded in throwing the anti-imperialist forces off-balance, if only for a while. Of course, they could still argue, and with justice, that the counter-offensive had become necessary in the first place because of their offensive—an offensive they had maintained day after day for many years by now. If the Unionists had carried the day by providing debt relief, then at least some of the credit still went to those who publicly raised and popularized the demand for debt relief since 1935. In fact, since the movement had been agitating on the debt issue, the only viable line in 1938 was to welcome the legislation as a product of the peasants' agitation, to claim all

[80] For a thorough treatment of Chhotu Ram's politics and political style, see Prem Chowdhry, *Punjab Politics*.

[81] See, for example, FR(1) September 1938, FR(1) October 1938; FR(1) November 1938, *H.P.* F.18/9/1938, 18/10/1938 and 18/11/1938; *The Tribune*, 30 August, 17 and 24 September and 31 October 1938.

the credit for it, and maintain the pressure for more radical measures. That was the only possible way of denying the Unionists the advantage in hegemonic terms. All the criticisms they made of the legislation would then have made sense, if they came after extending full support. But, blinded by its political hostility to the Unionists and deafened by the uproar created by its non-agriculturist supporters, the Congress was in no position to evolve an adequate response.

Everyday Peasant Politics: 1938–39

Apart from being witness to the activity around specific issues which we have already discussed—the colony tenants' struggle, the anti-settlement movement in Amritsar, the struggle over canal outlets in Lyallpur and Amritsar, the mobilization and counter-mobilization around the agrarian legislation, the political prisoners' release movement, the *malba* agitation—this period also saw a great deal of undefined but intense organizational, ideological and political activity among peasants. To ignore this undramatic, everyday, bread-and-butter aspects of the peasant movement in preference for the moments of high drama would be to forget that there is no high drama without painstaking and often repetitive preparation. Behind the peasant who marched in the *jatha* and bravely bore *lathis* and courted arrest lay the daily, untiring grind of the kisan activist who had made nurmerous visits on foot or on bicycle to the peasants' village, first persuaded him to come to the meeting in the gurdwara or under the tree in the village square, then to become a member of the Kisan Sabha and the Congress Committee that he had formed in his village, to attend the conference organized in the nearby large village, to contribute grain for the larger conference, and finally when occasion arose to march in the *jatha* to the district or provincial headquarters. One might say that when one sees the strength of a particular *morcha* or struggle, one can estimate the groundwork that went into its making. But what about those areas which did not show off their strength through *morchas* or strikes, though they were as capable and ready as the next district, simply because no occasion for it arose by way of an immediate issue for struggle? Surely the less dramatic activity of their peasants, their homely tale of meetings and conferences, also needs a chronicler.

The method of presentation I have adopted here is to begin with a general survey of political activity among peasants and then to take the district of Jullundur as a case study to show the kind of intense political mobilization that was carried on at this time. In the general survey, I shall perforce focus on the highlights, the big conferences, the attempts to spread to new areas, election campaigns, celebration of specific "weeks" or days, etc. In

the account of Jallundur, I shall turn the spotlight primarily on the daily village meetings, the enrolment of members and the tours of kisan workers.

In the first quarter of 1938 (apart from the political prisoners' release agitation, the Nili Bar tenants' movement and the Fatehwal incident, which we have already discussed), the most important conference was the Punjab Provincial Political Conference held at Madina in Rohtak District in the last week of March. Elaborate preparations were made, and appeals were issued by Sri Ram Sharma, MLA and President of the Rohtak DCC, and the Congress President, Dr Satyapal, to all nationalists to collect in large numbers to storm Chhotu Ram's citadel. Thousands of villagers reportedly attended and heard the speeches of the president of the conference, Sardar Kishen Singh (father of Bhagat Singh), Nawabzada Mahmud Ali and Mrs Satyawati, a firebrand socialist from Delhi, in which they questioned the Unionist ministry's credentials as a "zamindar" government, asked people not to participate in the coming imperialist war and demanded reduction of land revenue to one-fourth of the actual produce.[82]

An important kisan conference was organized in January at Kamalpura in Ludhiana, where it was mostly the CPI group of Communists who were in the forefront: Master Kabul Singh, Sohan Singh Josh, M.L. Kalia, Abdul Waris, Harkishen Singh Surjeet. Congress ministries were praised for their stand on the release of political prisoners and for allowing publication of the *Kirti* paper. In contrast, Unionists had suppressed civil liberties and not done anything for peasants. The red flag was unfurled but the socialists' willingness to fight under the national flag, the tricolour, in the battle for freedom was emphatically asserted. Around 30,000 people participated in the proceedings of the Conference, which also appealed for non-participation in the coming war.[83] Ferozepore, Lyallpur and Karnal held district political conferences, and Ambala a big rural political conference to counter the effects of a tour by the ministers.[84]

In a clear attempt to extend to the uncovered, backward and outlying areas, there was a tour between 11 and 14 March of Kangra District by a deputation headed by the Congress President Dr Satyapal. The Congressmen visited villages, addressed large meetings, formed Congress committees, and demanded exemption from land revenue of those paying less than Rs 5 and abolition of *begar*. They told the Dogra Rajputs, a community

[82] FR(2) March 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, April 1938; *H.P.* F. 58/38; *The Tribune*, 23, 26 and 29 March 1938.

[83] FR(1) January 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, first half of January 1938, *H.P.* F. 58/38; *The Tribune*, 7 January 1938.

[84] Intelligence Reports on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, April and the second half of May 1938, *H.P.* F. 58/38; *The Tribune*, 24 and 26 March 1938.

that supplied a large number of recruits, not to join the army.[85] A similar attempt to extend Congress influence was made with the holding of a District Political Conference at Tulamba in Multan District. An audience of 6,000 was addressed by Gopal Singh Quami, Lala Achint Ram, Principal Chhabil Das, Bibi Amar Kaur, Comrade Abdul Gafur, Pandit Shiv Datt Ranga, and Gian Sagar.[86] While new ground was being occupied, political activity continued in the old strongholds. Hoshiarpur, Jullundur, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Gurdaspur, Sheikhupura, Rohtak, Hissar, Ferozepore, Lyallpur—all continued to report a steady pace of activity.[87]

The second quarter of the year saw intense mobilization by the Congress among villagers in the Sialkot area since Dr Satyapal, the Congress President, was standing in a bye-election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly from the Amritsar–Sialkot (general) rural constituency. There were tours by groups of Congress workers in the villages; there was the Sialkot District Political Conference; there was the Gujranwala Political Conference which was attended also by a lot of people from neighbouring Sialkot; there were processions and meetings in Sialkot. Prominent in the mobilization were Chaudhri Krishan Gopal Dutt, a Congress leader who hailed from Sialkot, Lala Sham Lal, MLA (Central), Bhin Sen Sachar, Mian Iftikhar-ud-din, Harjap Singh and Baba Rur Singh of Ferozepore. Their efforts were rewarded when peasants went to vote in *jathas* singing nationalist songs. An important feature was 90 per cent voting by women and also a strong female presence in meetings. Dr Satyapal won with a comfortable majority of 4,000 in a total of 17,000 votes.[88]

[85] FR(2) March 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, April 1938, *H.P.* F. 58/38; *The Tribune*, 14 and 23 March 1938.

[86] *The Tribune*, 5 April 1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, first half of June 1938, *H.P.* F. 58/38.

[87] FR(1) January 1938, FR(1) and (2) February 1938, FR(2) March 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1938, 18/2/1938, 18/3/1938. Intelligence Reports on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, first half of January, second half of March, April, first half of May, second half of May and first half of June 1938, *H.P.* F. 58/38; *The Tribune*, 7, 27 January, 5 February 1938. In Sheikhupura, the Congress held meetings in 20 villages within one fortnight. *The Tribune*, 7 January 1938. Different representative bodies of peasants presented their point of view before the Punjab Land Revenue Committee (see my *Colonializing Agriculture*, Chapter 1), chaired by M.L. Darling, which was touring the province. In Montgomery, the demand was for a limit on the share of rent and land revenue that was to be paid by tenants. In Lyallpur, exemption from land revenue payment was demanded for those owning less than 5 acres. In Amritsar, a deputation from Tarn Taran tehsil comprising representatives of Akalis, Kisan Sabha, Socialists and Congress and led by Udham Singh Nagoke wanted a complete change in methods of assessment. Representatives of Amritsar Tehsil supported the evidence of the Institute of Agrarian Reform and wanted immediate relief for underfed and starving peasants. *The Tribune*, 15 and 28 January and 21 February 1938.

[88] *The Tribune*, 22, 26, 27 and 29 April, 1 May 1938. FR(1) May 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1938.

Apart from Jullundur, which we shall deal with separately, Hoshiarpur was the most active in this phase. Conferences, small and big, continued almost incessantly. May Day celebrations in villages; and a series of big conferences—Hariana Political Conference, the Hoshiarpur Political Conference, a big Kisan Conference in Una and the Doaba Rural Political Conference in Garhshankar Tehsil—were all held in this period.[89] Activity continued in Kangra,[90] and was sought to be extended to Attock[91] and Rawalpindi[92] districts, as also Jhang and Montgomery.[93] Ludhiana held an important District Political Conference, preceded by a volunteers' Training Camp at Jassowal from which volunteers marched on foot to the venue of the conference at Bajewal.[94] Rohtak and Karnal also continued to receive political attention.[95]

The Congress was very active in Gujranwala as well, where a big meeting on the occasion of the annual fair at the shrine of Sain Gulab Singh in the historic town of Ramnagar was addressed by Dr Satyapal. This was followed by largely attended meetings in Akalgarh, Kallianwala and Hafizabad, and by village tours by members of the DCC for enrolling members and forming Congress committees.[96] In Sheikhupura, the peasant conference that was held at Chuharkhana was graced by Baba Wasakha Singh, one of the most revered of the Ghadarites involved in the 1914–15 conspiracy case. Resolutions demanding the release of political prisoners, urging non-participation in the next war and reiterating all the continuing peasant demands relating to land revenue and cesses such as *malba*, *chowkidara*, *chahi*, *panchotra*, etc., were passed.[97] The Congress Socialist Party of Punjab announced at the Lahore session of the All India Congress Socialist Party (AICSP) in April that they had already recruited 75,000 members for the Kisan Sabhas in only five months of work.[98] And, as we know, Lyallpur was already in the grip of the canal outlets' agitation in May–June, and the movement

[89] *The Tribune*, 9 April, 3, 5 and 17 May, 4 , 8, 11 and 15 June 1938, FR(2) June 1938, *H.P.* 18/6/1938.

[90] *The Tribune*, 2 June 1938.

[91] *The Tribune*, 19 and 28 June 1938.

[92] *The Tribune*, 3 June 1938.

[93] FR(2) April 1938, FR(2) May 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1938, 18/5/1938. For Lahore and Ferozepore, see *The Tribune*, 4 and 29 June 1938.

[94] *The Tribune*, 4, 11 and 17 June 1938, FR(1) June 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1938.

[95] *The Tribune*, 13, 21 and 25 May 1938. The indefatigable Sri Ram Sharma, MLA, was busy organizing rural conferences in Rohtak, discussing with workers the problems arising out of recent arrests, and also visiting villages in Karnal.

[96] *The Tribune*, 14 June 1938.

[97] *The Tribune*, 1 July 1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, second half of July, *H.P.* F. 58/38. Baba Kesar Singh and Baba Harnam Singh American were also present.

[98] *The Tribune*, 13 April 1938.

was rapidly enveloping Amritsar, the latter simultaneously gearing up for its big demonstration in July. Unrest was continuing among the colony tenants as well.

In the third quarter of the year, the limelight was stolen by the Amritsar Bandobast Morcha and the polarization and mobilization for and against the agrarian legislation, which we have already detailed. There was still a lot of activity, though, in addition to these major thrusts. The effort to reach out to the hitherto "dark areas" continued, with Red Shirt volunteers, other Muslim leaders and Congress workers from neighbouring districts being roped in by the Rawalpindi Congress Committee which organized a political conference in Adhwal in Attock in mid-August. This was reported to be the first political gathering of its kind in this "backward locality"; the Muslim League also started counter-propaganda against the conference.[99] In mid-September, this conference was followed by an Akali District Conference in Attock, which was marked by a sharp attack on the Unionist ministry for its pro-landlord bias, its refusal to accept the demand for land revenue on the same basis as income tax even after both the conferences at Lyallpur (the Congress and the Unionist-sponsored conferences) had demanded it, its *lathi*-charge on Amritsar kisans and the high salaries of its ministers (Rs 3,000) as compared with those of the Congress ministers (Rs 500). At this conference, Master Tara Singh predicted the demise of the Unionist ministry in less than a year.[100] The significance of Attock was that it was the district of the premier, Sikandar Hayat Khan, and these were brave attempts to take him on in his home ground.

Other highlights include the observance of the All-India Kisan Day on 1 September, of the Anti-Recruitment Bill Day on 4 September (this was the Bill that was passed by the Central Assembly with Jinnah's support which Sikandar had been instrumental in securing) and the Amritsar Kisan Day on 1 October to press for the release of those arrested in the Amritsar Bandobast Morcha.[101] Hectic activity continued in Hoshiarpur, where the District Congress Committee (DCC) organized 36 meetings in 36 villages between 26 July and 15 August. Forthcoming elections to the district board

[99] FR(2) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1938; *The Tribune*, 8 July 1938. The Muslim League's efforts appear to have met with some success, for, according to an Intelligence Report, four out of the five meetings addressed between 18–24 August in Attock by Nawabzada Mahmud Ali (the young Congress leader who was a nephew of the premier and was specially brought in on such occasions to blunt the attack of the opposition) "met with a hostile reception" and consequently his tour was curtailed. It was being made clear through "hostile receptions" that any effort to breach the fortress of high landlordism, even if made with the help of an "insider", was not going to be tolerated. See the Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, 2nd half of September 1938; *H.P.* F. 58/38.

[100] *The Tribune*, 17 September 1938.

[101] See FR(1) September 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1938; *The Tribune*, 1, 5 and 19 September 1938.

had provided a new opportunity and occasion for mobilization.[102] Amritsar, too, maintained a running pace, even after the Bandobast Morcha had come to an end and many of its activists were still in jail. There was a flurry of activity in August to counter the effects of the ministerial tour and this was followed by a number of meetings in September organized under the Congress and Kisan banners.[103] A special feature was the political conference organized as part of the Muslim mass contact campaign in Waran Dattan, which was attended by 15,000 people, half of whom were reportedly Muslims. Sohan Singh Josh presided, and he and other speakers, many of them Muslim, criticized the Unionist ministry and the Muslim League for cooperating in getting the Army Recruitment Bill passed.[104] In Rohtak, too, the Muslim mass contact programme was reported to be proceeding very well.[105]

Another district which reported high levels of activity was Ludhiana, where the agitation over *malba* came to a head again, with some peasants getting arrested. The district had already achieved considerable success on this score, with 100 villages successfully getting exemption from payment of the *malba* cess. In addition, a Kisan workers' school was held and there were tours by the DCC; the Congress was reportedly quite happy with its progress in the district.[106] Lahore District held a District Political Conference and numerous other meetings, including by the District Kisan Committee, condemning the new settlement.[107] District political conferences were also held in Montgomery and Ferozepore.[108] An attempt was also made to move into a part of Gurdaspur District so far outside the ambit of Congress influence,[109] and the breakthrough made in Kangra was being consistently

[102] *The Tribune*, 9 and 27 July, 14 August, 5 September 1938. FR(1) July 1938, FR(1) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938, 18/8/1938.

[103] FR(1) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1938; *The Tribune*, 11, 21, 28 and 30 September 1938; Intelligence Report on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, second half of September, *H.P.* F. 58/38.

[104] *The Tribune*, 12 and 13 September 1938.

[105] *The Tribune*, 5 and 12 August 1938.

[106] FR(1) July 1938, FR(2) September 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1938, 18/9/1938; *The Tribune*, 23 July, 12, 28, 29, 30 August 1938.

[107] FR(2) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1938; *The Tribune*, 7 July, and 1, 12, 24 September 1938. Also see the Intelligence Reports on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War Propaganda in Punjab, first half of August and second half of September 1938, *H.P.* F.58/38, for the District Kisan Conference held at Kirtowal in Lahore district on 4 July 1938 and a political conference at Pattoki on 15 August 1938.

[108] *The Tribune*, 11 August 1938; FR(1) August 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1938; Intelligence Reports on Anti-Recruitment and Anti-War propaganda, first half of August and second half of September 1938, *H.P.* F. 58/38. This last report also showed that 11 meetings were held in Montgomery District between 1 and 13 September at which anti-recruitment speeches were made.

[109] FR(1) September 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1938.

maintained by organizational consolidation.[110] The Ferozepore Kisan Committee was also busy assisting the peasant activists of the neighbouring Kalsia state in their picketing of the annual cattle fair at Chirak.[111]

In the last quarter of the year 1938, the first important event was the holding of the Provincial Kisan Conference from 16–18 October by the Punjab Kisan Committee at Lyallpur.[112] Its significance lay in that it was the first time that delegates duly elected by primary members and representing the Kisan Committee in each district were meeting in a formal conference. These delegates would now in turn elect the office-bearers of the PKC. The fact that the process of enrolment of members, elections of delegates and then the election of office-bearers at the provincial level was successfully completed demonstrated the viability of this new provincial organization of the peasantry.

The Provincial Kisan Conference was held under the presidentship of Sajjad Zaheer, the UP Communist leader; about 20,000 people attended the open session. It appears that there was an attempt to demarcate the Kisan Sabha position from that of the Congress on the recent agrarian legislation by denouncing the "Kisan" Conference organized by the Congress in Lyallpur at the same time as the Unionist-sponsored Zamindara Conference in early September as a "capitalist" gathering. This may have been partly the result of the difficulty faced on the ground in explaining the Congress position on the legislation and partly a response to the censure of the All-India Kisan Council for aligning with the Congress "in failing to give unqualified support to the Punjab Government's recent agrarian legislation". The resolution passed at the conference now talked of support to the legislation to the extent that it helped the poor peasants of the province. It also declared that till the Land Alienation Act was so amended that the tiller of the soil was declared an agriculturist, the big landlords, who did not till the land, removed from the list of agriculturist tribes, and the tenants entitled to have proprietory rights on land, a campaign should be continued against the Punjab ministry.

In the election of office-bearers, Baba Kesar Singh became president instead of Baba Jwala Singh, who had met with a tragic and fatal road accident in May 1938 when travelling back from Montgomery. Baba Rur Singh, MLA, became vice-president and Bhagat Singh Bilga general secretary. Tehal Singh Bhangali became joint secretary. Harkishen Singh Surjeet and Harnam Singh Chamak were elected secretaries and Bhagwan Singh Longowal treasurer.

110 *The Tribune*, 21 August 1938.

111 FR(1) September 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1938.

112 This account of the Lyallpur Kisan Conference in this and the subsequent two paragraphs is based on the following: FR(2) October 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1938; *The Tribune*, 3, 10, 11, 17, 19, 21 October 1938; Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, pp. 206–207.

According to Bhagat Singh Bilga,[113] who was in the thick of the deliberations at the Conference, there were elaborate discussions at which the demands of each district were formulated and then the issues for struggle were decided. The plan was to hold a huge provincial-level demonstration after preparing for a year or a year-and-a-half. Before that, demonstrations were to be held in different districts. The Jullundur demonstration for canal water in December 1938 was the first one held as part of that plan. Others were to follow in other areas. The ideas was that this would also enable them to assess their own strength. (This plan, formulated at Lyallpur, was, however, says Bilga, disrupted by the unplanned launching of the Lahore Morcha, but more on that later.)

That the Punjab peasant movement had by this time been given a definite organizational shape by the Punjab Kisan Committee was acknowledged by the government as well, as the following longish quotation from a report written on the eve of the Lyallpur session of the Punjab Kisan Sabha would demonstrate:[114]

> Agrarian agitation continues to be fostered by the Punjab Kisan Committee at Amritsar and its district branches.... It now claims to have a paper membership of 75,000. Its aim and objects correspond with those published in the manifesto of the all-India Kisan Committee and are briefly complete freedom from economic exploitation and full economic power for the peasants and workers.... The Central Punjab and colony districts have regularly constituted Kisan Committees between which and the Punjab Kisan Committee at Amritsar there is a steadily increasing volume of correspondence indicating sound organisation and co-ordination and recognition of the value of propaganda. The recognized paper of the party is the ' Kirti-Lehar', a revolutionary and Communist Urdu and Gurmukhi weekly, financed by the Sikh American Ghadar Party and published in Meerut. The movement is now spreading to the Indian States in the Punjab, and is gaining in strength and popularity among a section of the Sikhs who comprise almost the entire membership.... The general effect of the movement is subversive and is directed primarily to spreading mass disaffection rather than to securing the redress of grievances.... The police are consistently vilified as the instruments of a reactionary Government... the differences between landlords and tenants are exaggerated and exploited. District Kisan Conferences and local fairs are made the occasion for disseminating communist and revolutionary ideas. Recently there has been a strong current in evidence at Kisan meetings of anti-British feeling, opposition of war and enlistment in the army and condemnation of the Unionist party.

[113] Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga.

[114] FR(2) September 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1938.

Apart from the Lyallpur Conference, the month of October was also taken up by the intensive tours of the ministers, which we have already discussed earlier. Perforce, much of the oppositional activity was concentrated on a counter-campaign.[115] In addition, this was the time when enrolment of Congress members intensified to meet the last date of 31 October.[116] The final membership figures showed a considerable increase in enrolment over the past year: from 94,772 to 143,343 for rural members and from 128,855 to 188,791 for all members.[117]

In Hissar and Rohtak, and especially in Hissar, famine conditions prevailed and the Congress workers were totally preoccupied with the work of providing relief. Sri Ram Sharma and Neki Ram Sharma were organizing the Congress Relief Committee, and the latter even went to Calcutta to get help from traders and also Subhas Bose, the Congress President. Political conferences to demand relief from the government were also held.[118] In Lahore, remissions in revenue were demanded on account of failure of rains and scarcity of canal water.[119] In Amritsar, there was again great agitation over the issue of *malba* in the Ramdas Ilaqa, presumably because local officials must have demanded the cess in contravention of the announcement by the government.[120] Subhas Bose, the Congress president, visited the province in the second half of November, and addressed meetings all over the province, including Lahore, Hoshiarpur, Jullundur, Gujranwala, Jhelum, Rawalpindi and Campbellpore. His visit, however, according to an official assessment, was not as great an attraction as Gandhiji's or Nehru's.[121] Districts which continued to report a high level of activity were Ludhiana, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Lahore, Sheikhupura and Gurdaspur,[122] and, of course, Jullundur, which we shall discuss separately.

In the year 1939, the energies of the peasant movement were mostly consumed by the Lahore Kisan Morcha which began in March. Nevertheless, there were other stirrings which deserve mention, and which it would be

[115] FR(1) and (2) October 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1938; *The Tribune*, 8 and 14 October 1938.

[116] FR(1) and (2) October 1938, FR(1) November 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/10/1938, 18/11/1938.

[117] FR(2) November 1937, FR(1) December 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1937 and 18/12/1938.

[118] FR(1) November 1938, FR(1) December 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1938, 18/12/1938; *The Tribune*, 13 October, 6 and 7 November, 14 December 1938.

[119] *The Tribune*, 1 and 4 November 1938; FR(1) November 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1938.

[120] *The Tribune*, 7 December 1938.

[121] FR(2) November 1938, FR(1) December 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1938, 18/12/1938.

[122] In Ludhiana, after 23 years, for the first time a conference was held to commemorate the death of Kartar Singh Sarabha, hanged in the Ghadar conspiracy case of 1914–15, at his village Sarabha in Ludhiana. It was organized by Communists. An important Kisan Conference was held at Mallah in Ludhiana in December where Sohan Singh Josh and other MLAs addressed the gathering. FR(2) November 1938, FR(1) December 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1938, 18/12/1938; *The Tribune*, 12 and 13 December 1938. For Amritsar, see *The Tribune*, 15 and 31 October, 12 December 1938. For the rest of the districts, see FR(1) and (2) November 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1938, *The Tribune*, 9 October, 4 and 15 November 1938.

unfair to ignore. We have already discussed the unrest in the canal colonies of Multan and Montgomery which occupied a prominent position in the first quarter of the year 1939, with deputations to Lahore, clashes, arrests, etc. Apart from this, there was considerable activity in Hissar in connection with famine relief work. The Congress under the leadership of Neki Ram Sharma collected money, grain and clothes for distribution among the famine-stricken. Protest rallies were organized and it was pointed out that of an affected population of 7 lakhs only one-and-a-half lakhs were covered by the famine relief works.[123]

In Gurdaspur, the peasants of village Chima Khudian resolved to stop paying the punitive police tax which they and seven other villages in the district had been paying for some time, Chima Khudian having already paid Rs 18,000 by itself. The President of the Punjab Kisan Committee, Baba Kesar Singh, addressed a conference in the village, and this was followed by a series of meetings in the village, leading to great excitement in the whole Ilaqa.[124] In Amritsar, a deputation of the Kisan Committee met the deputy commissioner to ask for remissions on account of damage to crops by a hail-storm.[125] Kisan leaders of the Bandobast Morcha of last July who were released now were welcomed with conferences at which dramatic performances were staged which "did much harm to government".[126] In Hoshiarpur, a number of meetings were addressed by prominent leaders such as Dr Satyapal, Sardul Singh Caveesher, Gopal Singh Quami and Bibi Raghbir Kaur to mobilize for the coming district board elections.[127] In Rohtak, Unionist supporters resisted a Congress attempt to hold a meeting in village Asaudah, leading to a clash. Another attempt a few days later with Sarojini Naidu in the chair also met with physical resistance.[128] In Attock, Rawalpindi and Jhelum in the west, Congress attempts to extend to the more backward and predominantly Muslim areas continued.[129] In Ludhiana, Karnal and Rawalpindi, district board elections contributed to the political activity in the rural areas.[130]

Bhagat Singh's death anniversary was observed on 23 March at six places in the province, including at his village Khatkar Kalan in Jullundur District, where a Shaheed Mela was organized by Socialist and Kisan activists with Ram Kishen, a recently-released revolutionary terrorist, as president. The Lahore Kisan Morcha also commenced at this time.[131]

[123] FR(1) January 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1939; *The Tribune*, 15 and 19 January, 16 February 1939.
[124] *The Tribune*, 23 January, 4 February and 4 March 1939.
[125] *The Tribune*, 23 February 1939.
[126] FR(2) March 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1939.
[127] FR(1) January 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1939; *The Tribune*, 21 January, 22 and 28 February 1939.
[128] FR(2) February 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/2/1939; *The Tribune*, 5 March 1939.
[129] FR(1) March 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1939; *The Tribune*, 23 March and 15 February 1939.
[130] FR(1) January 1939, FR(1) March 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/1/1939 and 18/3/1939.
[131] FR(2) March 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1939.

Another development around this time was a move to refuse canal water as a protest against the enhancement of revenue under the new settlement in Lahore and the refusal of the government to accept the demands for reduction in land revenue and water rates. Presumably encouraged by the Committee formed for this purpose, some landholders of village Kanganpur in the Kasur sub-division of Lahore, who had collected to give evidence before the Canal Act Committee, refused to have any dealings with the Committee and even followed the Canal Committee into the neighbouring Montgomery District. There were also reports of canal outlets being damaged and soon the agitation was said to have spread from Kasur in Lahore and Dipalpur in Montgomery to Ferozepore District where a Water Rate Reduction Committee was formed. Forty outlets were reportedly closed by the agitators and their supporters. Towards the end of May, the agitation was called off after an interview with the premier. However, at the same time came fresh reports of peasants in the Muzaffargarh District refusing to accept water from the new Haveli project because of the increase in assessment rates. In Multan, too, stoppages and delays in the new canal system were causing discontent.[132]

At the end of June, another struggle erupted, this time in Chuharchak Village in Ferozepore District. This was the village of Baba Rur Singh, MLA, now vice-president of the Punjab Kisan Committee. Villagers resolved to stop payment of the *chowkidara* tax—its abolition had been a longstanding demand of the peasant movement. A deputation that went to negotiate with the *tehsildar* at Moga was arrested for non-payment. On hearing of this, more *jathas* came from the village and in a few days 350 people, including 50 women, had courted arrest. Since this tax was collected along with the land revenue and the revenue officials would not accept land revenue without this tax, in effect the movement became one of non-payment of land revenue. The Punjab Kisan Committee, however, at this point, engaged in a desperate effort to save the Lahore Kisan Morcha, did not want any diversion of resources or attention and ordered the local committee to unilaterally suspend the agitation in order to concentrate all energies on Lahore.[133]

From 15 to 22 August, the Congress observed the Mass Contact Week in which a vigorous propaganda effort was made. The Communist leader Sohan Singh Josh, recently elected general secretary of the Provincial

[132] FR(1) and (2) April 1939, FR(1) and (2) May 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1939 and 18/5/1939.

[133] FR(2) June 1939, FR(1) July 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1939 and 18/7/1939; Craik to Linlithgow, 8 July 1939, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/88; *All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report*, 1939–40, Appendix B, Report of the Punjab Kisan Movement, March 1939 to February 1940, Archives of Contemporary History, JNU; interview with Ram Nath, a left-wing political activist of Ferozepore District; *The Tribune*, 5, 6, 7 and 9 July and 8 August 1939.

Congress Committee, gave a call to all shades and schools of opinion to make the week a success by carrying to the masses the message that communalism and religious disunity only served the interests of the rich and all communal tendencies in the province must be eradicated. The Rohtak DCC announced a tour of 100 villages with meetings and enrolment of members. In Sialkot, 8 meetings in eight different villages were held in 2–3 days. In Kangra, mass contact included a tour by Muslim Congress leaders asking other Muslims to join the Congress. In Ferozepore, the DCC organized a programme by which three groups of Congress workers covered 200 miles on foot and delivered the message to 15,000 kisans in their villages. Lyallpur and Amritsar also reported activity in connection with mass contact, and MLAs toured their constituencies.[134]

Kangra, Rawalpindi, Hissar, Hoshiarpur, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Gujranwala, Sheikhupura, Rohtak—all continued to report high levels of activity[135] (in addition to that connected with the Lahore Kisan Morcha), Lyallpur peasants took a *jatha* of 500 to the headquarters of the district demanding remissions for damage to crops by hailstorms.[136] In Rohtak, the Congress Socialist Party's conference was presided over by Jayaprakash Narayan in the absence of Acharya Narendra Dev who was refused entry into Punjab. Their *pandal* also became the venue of the Famine Conference attended by 5,000 people.[137] Seth Sudershan and Bhagat Ram, MLAs, toured Hoshiarpur and Kangra.[138] In Amritsar, a 3-day conference at village Sainsara continued despite arrests of activists.[139] At Sargodha from 5–7 September, just before the recently-declared Second World War was to bring most open political activity to a halt, the Second Punjab Provincial Kisan Conference was held. (The last one was held at Lyallpur in October 1938.) N.G. Ranga attended, and Baba Rur Singh was elected president and Dr Bhag Singh general secretary. The Lahore Kisan Morcha was yet to be called off, and about 4,000 workers and leaders of the Punjab Kisan Sabha were at that time in jail.[140]

Moving now from the province to a single district, I take up the case of Jullundur, which saw perhaps the most intense political mobilization and activity among all the districts of the province and yet had no occasion to launch any "direct action" of its own.

[134] *The Tribune*, 10, 13, 16, 22, 23, and 25 August 1939; FR(2) August 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1939.
[135] *The Tribune*, 6, 10, 12, 21, 23, 25, 29 May, 4, 12 and 27 July, 14, 23, 25 September 1939; FR(1) and (2) May 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1939.
[136] *The Tribune*, 7 July 1939.
[137] FR(1) July 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1939; *The Tribune*, 4 and 7 July 1939.
[138] *The Tribune*, 31 August, 25 September 1939.
[139] *The Tribune*, 4 September 1939.
[140] *The Tribune*, 8 September 1939; Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, p. 207.

The Zenith of Everyday Politics: Jullundur, 1938

To get a rough idea of the scale and intensity of the political activity in the district, I have drawn up a list of the places mentioned in just one year, 1938, in just one source—*The Tribune*—in connection with meetings, conferences, propaganda tours or enlistment of members. *The Tribune,* it should be kept in mind, was an English-language provincial-level paper, based in Lahore and not a local daily of Jullundur; its coverage, though quite remarkable given its middle-class character and that of its readership, could by no means be exhaustive. Nevertheless, the list is impressive. (The date of the newspaper report is given in brackets after the name of the place):

> In villages Kotli Than and Isarwal, and in 20 villages of Munki Ilaqa, Kisan Committees were formed (4 January). Sikh *dewan* in Kartarpur Ilaqa (11 January). Conference at Loraya, near Bhogpur (8 February). Big political conference at Bhungarni (15 February). DCC carries on propaganda in remote areas of Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil: meetings at villages Dharamgarh, Mahilgehla, Karnama, Mokandpur and Aur (22 February). Political conference at Kotla Nautar Singh (22 February). Conference at Chitti in Jullundur tahsil (6 April). Large gathering of peasants at Garhi in Nawanshahr Doaba Tahsil (15 April). Well-attended *dewan* on Baisakhi at Dhesian Sang in Phillaur Tahsil (17 April). Deputation, led by Hari Singh Soundh, touring rural areas to collect funds for Doaba Socialist Conference at Lidhar Kalan in Nawanshahr Doaba Tahsil (22 April). May Day celebrated in village Shankar (3 May). Conference held at Kanj Kalan in Nakodar tahsil attended by villagers of Bet Ilaqa (12 May). DCC to hold 15 conferences between 20 May and 15 June; first five at Posijan Kalan, Malsian, Shahkote, Sandhewal and Talwandi Sanghesian (14 May). DCC to hold conference in Lasoori, Turna, Nal Manak, Lohian, Khiwa Oggi, Kangna, Killi, Niranwal, Sadiqpur in Nakodar tahsil (20 May). Bhagat Singh Bilga presides over DCC-organised conference for District Board elections in Sashal Qazian in Nawanshahr tahsil. Four more conferences planned (28 and 31 May). Doaba Political Conference being held at Banga, Nawanshahr tahsil by DCC (2 June). Meeting at Shahkote in Nakodar (4 June). Conference at Dosanjh Kalan, Phillaur tahsil. Meetings held at many places in Nawanshahr tahsil (5 June). More meetings planned at Adampur Doaba, Govindpur, Jhandaji on 6, 9, 13, 14 June for Congress propaganda among rural masses (7 June). Political conference attended by a galaxy of provincial leaders at Shahkote on 11 and 12 June (15 June). DCC organised annual fair at Baba Jawahar Singh's samadhi at Khattar Kalan in Nawanshahr tahsil, thousands attended (18 June). Another meeting in Nawanshahr tahsil in village Phaiala. More meetings in Nakodar tahsil next fortnight (23 June). Well-attended

political conference at Litran in Nakodar tahsil held by DCC (15 July). Political conference held at Banda Bahadurgarh (17 July). Well-attended conference on 20 July at Nahal in Nakodar tahsil by DCC (22 July). Political conferences in three villages in Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil (23 July). Another meeting at Kohan Kalan in Shahkote Ilaqa. Massive propaganda effort by DCC—political conferences in Chitti, Kang Kalan, Adampur Doaba, Nassi, Nagra, Barwa, Gunachaur, etc. (29 July). District Kisan Committee organising *jathas* of 100 each from the villages Bilga, Jandiala, Bundala, Chima, and Uppal to send in support of Amritsar Bandobast Morcha (3 August). Congress Committees formed in 20 villages in last few weeks: Mokandpur, Sarhal, Khankhana, Bains, Kultham, Rurka Kalan, Appra, Dhanda, Sang Dhesian, Phillaur, Roorkee, Mothadda Kalan, Moran, Lasara, Dallewal, Jhala, Chima Kalan, Mehshampur, Khaira, Nawanpind. Congress Committee at Chitti starting a Kisan Workers' Training Camp (11 August). Political workers on tour collecting funds for political conference at Lidhar Kalan in Nawanshahr Doaba tahsil. Peasants of Alawalpur Ilaqa hold a meeting (7 September). Conference at Talwandi Madho in Nakodar tahsil (29 September). Premier and Chhotu Ram visiting village Kalabakra in Bhogpur Ilaqa (3 October). Rural political conference at Bandagarh in Jullundur tahsil (3 October). Nurmahal and Phillaur Thana Kisan Committees set up (5 October). DCC to hold District Political Conference at Kasra Kalan in Nakodar tahsil on 15 and 16 October (6 October). Kabul Singh Gobindpuri, MLA, and others toured Adampur Ilaqa, organising Congress Committees, addressing meetings (15 October). Bhagat Singh Bilga, General Secretary of the Punjab Kisan Sabha and of the District Congress Committee interned in his village Bilga (22 October). Comrade Harbans Singh of Bundala interned in his village for second time for one year (27 October). A mass meeting was held in Goraya in Phillaur tahsil which condemned internment of kisan activist Bujha Singh in his village Chak Maidas for one year (8 November). A crowded *dewan* at Shankar in Nakodar tahsil congratulates recently-released Babbar Akalis (10 November). Public meeting at Rurka Kalan, Phillaur tahsil (19 November). A band of kisan activists led by Lahori Ram Pardesi to address meetings and form kisan committees in many villages: Bhandal, Himmat, Kot Badal Khan, Unarpur, Sherpur, Ajha, Shadipur, Jaggar, Dhanipind and a dozen others (19 November). A Dehati Political Conference being organized at Kartarpur by DCC on December 24 and 25. At a meeting in a village in Adampur, Congress position towards Muslims was clarified to remove misconceptions spread by Muslim League (21 November). A public meeting at Jamsher reiterated kisan demands (22 November). A political conference at Sarhala Khurd condemns policy of interning comrades (24 November). A political conference was held

at Khanpur in Nakodar where 5,000 kisans vowed to participate in demonstration on 20 December in Jullundur for canal water (26 November). Jullundur District Political Conference being held at Noormahal on 17 and 18 December (1 December). A kisan meeting was held at Barapind (5 December) . Meetings demanding remissions and steps to tackle scarcity of water held by kisan workers in Themdian, Kahma, Sidhwan, Bharowal, Hirain, Chak Dama, Malla Budhian, and Jhingran villages in Nawanshahr tahsil (6 December). Rural political Conference at Bandagarh (10 December). The DCC was to hold political conference at Noormahal in Phillaur tahsil and at Kartarpur as part of Muslim mass contact programme (14 December). A public meeting was held at Samrani in Phillaur tahsil reiterating long-standing peasant demands (17 December).

That the depth of politicization and level of political consciousness was no less than in any comparable area such as Amritsar or Lyallpur, and certainly higher than in Lahore District which hosted the famous Kisan Morcha, is also shown by the fact that the Lahore Kisan Morcha was sustained for one full month by volunteers from Jullundur during May 1939.[141] In fact, so complete was its absorption in the Lahore Kisan Morcha that it took four months for normal, routine political activity to be resumed by the Jullundur Kisan Committee.[142] Earlier, in July 1938, volunteers were ready to go to Amritsar as well to participate in the Bandobast Morcha, but the Morcha was called off before they actually left.[143]

Jullundur was also the district chosen for the first demonstration that was held as part of the organized plan formulated at the Lyallpur Kisan Conference in October 1938 to hold test demonstrations in different districts before organizing a mammoth provincial-level demonstration.[144] Interestingly, the first report of the proposed demonstration that we have, dated 30 September, suggested that what was planned was a "satyagraha on the lines of the Amritsar Morcha", and not just a demonstration.[145] However, this was before the Provincial Kisan Conference at Lyallpur, and clearly after that there was an understanding that *morchas* were to be postponed till the organized strength of the movement had been tested through

[141] *All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report*, 1939–40, Appendix B, Report of Punjab Kisan Movement, March 1939–February 1940. Also see *The Tribune*, 3, 5 and 20 May 1939.

[142] *The Tribune*, 24 October 1939.

[143] *The Tribune*, 3 August 1938.

[144] Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga. See the fourth section of this chapter.

[145] *The Tribune*, 30 September 1938. The District Kisan Committee meeting under the presidentship of Baba Hari Singh Soundh passed a resolution that in the event of the Punjab government failing to meet the peasant demands, a satyagraha would be launched on the lines of the Amritsar Morcha on 20 December 1938. The list of demands was very long—abolition of *begar, chowkidara, chahi, malba*, change in the system of revenue and, of course, immediate steps for the arrest of the falling water-level.

demonstrations that did not culminate in *morchas*.[146] The Jullundur demonstration on 20 December was thus organized strictly according to the line laid down at Lyallpur.

Preparations for the demonstration had obviously begun well in advance, for by early November the Akalis of the district were so worried about the District Kisan Committee, that is, the leftists, stealing the show that they organized a *jatha* of 100 to demonstrate before the Assembly at Lahore and secured an interview for their deputation with the premier and the revenue minister. They raised the same demand that was announced by the District Kisan Committee as its main demand: a canal for the district to counteract the effects of the declining water level which made well irrigation very difficult. The revenue minister made an announcement in the Assembly that the problems of Jullundur (and Hoshiarpur) relating to the falling water level were being investigated.[147]

The final demonstration held on 20 December in Jullundur was supported by all political groups—the Congress, the Akalis, the Babbar Akalis, the Socialists, the Kirtis and the Communists. The leadership was provided by the District Kisan Committee. Smaller meetings at which peasants took vows to attend the demonstration had been held earlier and prominent Kisan activists from other parts of the province had assembled in Jullundur to ensure the success of the demonstration. According to Bhagat Singh Bilga, "the whole district collected" for the demonstration, and this is confirmed by other participant-organizers. The demonstration was completely peaceful, nor did its members attempt to defy any laws and court arrest[148] (as in Amritsar the previous July and in Lahore in the following March).

Jullundur District also served as an excellent example of the success of the policy of working within the Congress; Kisan and Congress activists were usually the same people. The DCC was as active as the District Kisan Committee in rural mobilization, and the office-bearers of the Congress Committees were mostly the left-wing peasant activists.[149] Bhagat Singh

[146] Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga.

[147] See FR(1) November 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/11/1938; *The Tribune*, 12, 13 and 14 November 1938.

[148] FR(2) December 1938, *H.P.* F. 18/12/1938; *The Tribune*, 26 November, 8, 15, and 17 December 1938; interviews with Bhagat Singh Bilga, Ujagar Singh Bilga and Master Hari Singh.

[149] For example, of the three members of the DCC, who were reported to be doing Congress propaganda in the remote areas of Nawanshahr Doaba Tahsil, Master Kabul Singh Gobindpuri and Harkishen Singh Surjeet were clearly Communists. *The Tribune*, 22 February 1938. Bhagat Singh Bilga, the Kirti-Communist leader, played an active role in the Congress mobilization for the District Board elections. See *The Tribune*, 28 and 31, May 1938. Baba Hari Singh Soundh, President of the District Kisan Committee, presided over the DCC-organized meeting at the annual fair in village Khattar Kalan. *The Tribune*, 18 June 1938. Dr Bhag Singh Canadian, Lahori Ram Pardesi, Bhagat Singh Bilga, all well-known Communist workers, participated in the DCC-organized political conference at Litran in Nakodar tahsil. *The Tribune*, 15 July 1938. Also see, for example, *The Tribune*, 22, 23, 26 July, 11 and 25 August 1938. The examples are endless.

Bilga was the general secretary of the DCC.[150] Left-wing workers were freely elected to represent the district in the higher Congress bodies.[151] The Congress organization was firmly established in the villages by the efforts of the Kisan activists and they in turn reaped the advantage of going to the villages as representatives of the Congress—the party of Gandhiji and Nehru, and the symbol of Indian anti-imperialism. Jullundur was second only to Lyallpur in enrolment of Congress members—in November 1938 it had 316 primary committees and 14,455 members.[152]

Jullundur also had the advantage, because of its old political tradition, of being the home of many dedicated and accomplished political activists, among them being Baba Karam Singh Chima, Master Kabul Singh Gobindpuri, Harjap Singh, Seth Sudershan, Pandit Mulraj Sharma, Master Mota Singh Anandpuri, Baba Hari Singh Soundh, Bhagat Singh Bilga, Bujha Singh, Lahori Ram Pardesi, Harbans Singh Bundala, Hira Singh Dard, Lal Singh American, Balwant Singh Dukhia, Ujagar Singh Bilga, Jwala Singh Barapind, Dr Bhag Singh Canadian, Chain Singh Chain, Daya Singh Bundala, Gurcharan Singh Randhawa and Harkishen Singh Surjeet. Many of them were from the Ghadar-Kirti party and had been trained in Moscow. The high rate of emigration from the district also contributed to the widening of the political horizons—returning emigrants brought back new ideas of liberty and equality along with hard cash.

Again, the high level of political consciousness is also testified to by the activists. H.S. Surjeet, for example, says that already by 1936 the consciousness of the people was very high due to various reasons, among them Nehru's slogan of socialism and the acute debt problem since the early 1930s. He says that of the 1,200 villages in the district, he himself had personally set up kisan organizations in 800. He would visit 10 villages a day and set up Congress and kisan committees, enrolling about 10 members himself and leaving other comrades to do the rest while he went on to the next village. The organizational task was relatively easy because of the high level of political consciousness.[153] Chain Singh Chain points out that when the old Ghadri Babas went to the villages and asked the people to contribute in any way, they readily did so, thus easing the otherwise difficult task of mobilization.[154] The old proverb, "even a dead elephant is worth a lakh and a quarter", was very true of the Ghadar/Kirti political workers. Even when they were interned in their villages, they performed the extremely useful task of holding training camps for activists.[155] As a consequence,

[150] *The Tribune*, 22 October 1938.
[151] See *The Tribune*, 7 January 1938 and 12 January 1939.
[152] *The Tribune*, 7 November 1938.
[153] Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet.
[154] Interview with Chain Singh Chain.
[155] Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga.

again, the political level of the ordinary activist was raised; and this in turn would affect the political level of the peasants he organized. The size of the audiences at the political conferences was also suggestive—and it is to be noted that these were taking place in ordinary times, not when a struggle or *morcha* was on. For example, 45,000 people were said to have attended the Doaba Political Conference at Narur in April 1939.[156] To collect audiences of this size without star attractions such as Nehru or Bose or even Jayaprakash Narain or N.G. Ranga and without any *morcha* in the offing was in itself a considerable achievement. More than that, it was proof of the spread of political consciousness among the people. It is easy to mobilize people around a long-felt demand or grouse, it is easy to get them to strike in a moment of anger or hatred, but it is not easy to get them, on any ordinary day, for no specific identifiable reason, with no bait of *darshan* of a great man, to trudge miles on dusty roads to attend a meeting. And the peasants of Jullundur, it seems, were willing to do that.

The Long *Morcha*: Lahore, 1938–39

As in post-modern fiction, the climax of our story comes in the middle and not in the end. In the Kisan Morcha at Lahore in 1939, the Punjab peasant movement touched a peak—in organization, in influence, in mobilization—which it did not reach again till Independence. (After 1939, war-time repression, the unpopular Peoples' War line and its fallout, and then the partition continued to handicap the movement.) A total of around 5,000 people went to jail in this Morcha, a considerable figure by any reckoning. And except in the very early days, sentences of nine months and above were quite common—again, a tough punishment by any standards. The Morcha lasted six months—a long time for a provincial-level sectional struggle.

Its success is all the more striking when we consider that its origins were and still are shrouded in a controversy that time has done little to mellow. If we recall that the Lyallpur Kisan Conference in October 1938 had chalked out a detailed plan of action in which different districts were to hold demonstrations to test their strength and then, at the end of these series of demonstrations, a big provincial-level demonstration would be organized. Besides, an organized effort to spread influence in hitherto untouched areas and sections was to be made. The Lahore Kisan Morcha, launched by the District Kisan Committee of Lahore, without the permission of the Punjab Kisan Committee, was, in the eyes of the dominant group in the Punjab Kisan Sabha, the Kirtis, a sabotage of this plan. The District Kisan Sabha had no authority to extend the demonstration into a Morcha by

[156] *The Tribune*, 10 March and 4 April 1939.

violating Section 144 and offering arrests. There is even a suggestion that this was a deliberate violation of discipline by the CPI group who dominated the District Kisan Committee of Lahore—Yog Raj and Tehal Singh Bhangali.[157]

According to Bhagat Singh Bilga, a major leader of the Kirti group and then general secretary of the Punjab Kisan Committee: "perhaps they did not do so intentionally but still it was a sabotage of our movement. Because we were still preparing—preparing for the big struggle. And in between they started another struggle.... We were pushed into this struggle. We had made no preparations for it".[158] Harkishen Singh Surjeet, who belonged to the CPI group, disagrees and argues that if a certain area is burning, you cannot wait for the whole province to get ready. He maintains that Yog Raj and Tehal Singh Bhangali took the decision after due discussion.[159] Despite Surjeet's protests, however, it does appear that, whatever the merits of the decision taken at Lahore to go in for courting arrest by defying Section 144, it was taken without the prior sanction of the Punjab Kisan Committee.

The annual report for 1939–40 on the Punjab Kisan Movement submitted by the general secretary of the Punjab Kisan Committee to the All-India Kisan Sabha also clearly expressed the feeling that the Morcha was a diversion from the plan. To quote: "The Kisan Workers had intended to strengthen their organisation in view of the impending critical times. But the district of Lahore was restive.... In spite of our efforts to postpone the struggle, the Lahore demonstration turned into a prolonged Morcha. All the energy and resources of the kisan workers, intended to be used for placing the kisan committee on war basis, had to be utilized to make the Morcha a success." It also went on to say that, because of the Morcha, "we were precluded from devoting our attention towards the task of extending kisan work (to areas) heretofore outside the pale of kisan movement".[160] However, this does not mean that the Provincial Kisan Committee stinted in its support to the movement, as will soon become evident from the account of the movement.

On 22 March 1939, it was reported that around 3,000 Kisans had arrived in Lahore to participate in the demonstration before the Assembly Chamber

[157] Interview with Bhagat Singh Bilga. Master Hari Singh also says that the district leadership of the Kisan Sabha launched the Morcha without permission of the provincial leaders who were compelled to lend support and mobilize from the whole province (interview). Chhajju Mal Vaid also recounts that his first political contacts were with cadre returning from jail in the Lahore Kisan Morcha. They told him how the movement had not been planned by the executive. It was started by two men who were with the CPI, Yog Raj and one other, and then everyone had to join and 4,000 went to jail (interview).
[158] Interview.
[159] Interview.
[160] *All-India Kisan Sabha*, *Annual Report*, 1939–40, Appendix B, Report of the Punjab Kisan Movement, March 1939 to February 1940.

the next day to protest against the enhancement in land revenue in the recent resettlement of Lahore District. A meeting was held on that day as well as on the morning of 23 March at Mori Gate after which a procession wound its way towards the Assembly. The demonstrators were stopped at Circular Road and told to send a deputation to meet the premier, but the members of this deputation could not be "non-agriculturists", or non-residents of Lahore District. This excluded the leader of the demonstration, Yog Raj, and the offer was therefore declined. After this, a decision was taken to defy Section 144 by insisting on going to the Assembly, and in this manner 105 members of the demonstration were arrested. The next day the premier sent a message through the senior superintendent of police offering to receive a deputation led by Yog Raj, "provided he does not stay there or act as your spokesman". This was not acceptable to the agitators and the courting of arrest continued. By the end of the month, 374 arrests had been effected.[161]

In the early part of April, there was difficulty in getting recruits for offering arrests, partly due to the onset of the harvesting season,[162] and the Punjab Kisan Committee stepped in to lend its support to the District Committee.[163] Volunteers were called from neighbouring districts and by 16 April, 700 arrests had been effected.[164] The Punjab Kisan Committee also appointed a sub-committee consisting of Baba Rur Singh, Master Gajjan Singh and Ram Kishen to guide the Lahore District Committee.[165] On 16 April, the premier met a deputation which included all the members on the original list. He explained to them the sliding scale system, the results of the new settlement and promised to investigate grievances and release the 700 prisoners. The agitators, however, it appears, now wanted not only the right to demonstrate before the Assembly but a three-year postponement of the settlement and negotiations with them on how the final settlement would be implemented. For a moment it had looked as if a settlement might emerge, but this was not to be and the Morcha continued.[166]

A concerted effort was now made to demonstrate kisan strength. The PKC took over the Morcha and summoned more volunteers from other

[161] *The Tribune*, 23, 24, 25 March, 1 April 1939. FR(2) March 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1939. At this stage, the governor dismissed it as an agitation manufactured by the Congress and Communists to embarass the ministry and prophezied that it should fizzle out in a few days. Letter from H.D. Craik to Linlithgow, 2 April 1939, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/88.
[162] FR(l) April 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1939. Interview with Sohan Singh Narangabadi of Amritsar District, who recounts the difficulty in getting volunteers because of the onset of the harvest season.
[163] *The Tribune*, 10 April 1939.
[164] *The Tribune*, 17 April 1939.
[165] *The Tribune*, 11 April 1939.
[166] *The Tribune*, 17 April 1939, FR(1) and (2) April 1939, *H.P.* F. 4/1939. Letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 16 April and 2 May 1939, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/88.

districts.[167] A new feature was the participation of women. Between 17 April and 3 May, the number of women arrested outnumbered the men. A total of 107 women offered themselves for arrest in this period. Among these were Bibi Tej Kaur, Mrs Tehal Singh and Mrs Yog Raj. Some of the women came with their babies in their arms. Initially the authorities adopted a soft attitude towards the women and would send them back to their villages, but they later felt that this was encouraging the women and therefore started to put them in jail. Some of the batches of women were very militant; they sat on *dharna* and did *siapa* or mock mourning, and complained of abuse by the police when produced in court. The women volunteers were mostly from Lahore District.[168] But it was the *jatha* of 11 octogenarian kisans carrying a red flag and marching in procession that stole the show! The police kept well away from them.[169]

By May it seemed that Lahore District had exhausted its strength and after that the Morcha was mainly run by volunteers from other districts. Amritsar and Jullundur led in this but help also came from Gurdaspur, Lyallpur, Ferozepore, Hoshiarpur, Ludhiana, Sheikhupura, Sargodha. Meetings exhorting peasants to join up for the *jathas* marching to Lahore were held in these districts and then *jathas* formed and flagged off to Lahore on foot. En route they passed through many villages and spread the message of the *Morcha*.[170] Amritsar even organized a *jatha* of 500. Amritsar's

[167] FR(1) May 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1939.

[168] *The Tribune*, 18, 22, 25, 26, 28, 29, 30 April, 2 and 3 May 1939; FR(1) May 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/5/1939.

[169] *The Tribune*, 16 June 1939.

[170] For example, Master Hari Singh recalls that he organized 50 meetings in his constituency, Hoshiarpur, and sent *jathas*. He specially mentions the districts of Jullundur, Lyallpur and Ferozepore as extending support to the *Morcha* (interview). Given next are some examples to show the kind of support that was received: the Kisan Committees of Gurdaspur and Faridkot State wrote to the PKC offering 100 men each for the Morcha. *The Tribune*, 11 April 1939. Gurdaspur also offered a women's *jatha*. *The Tribune*, 24 April 1939. The District Kisan Committee, Ludhiana, sent a *jatha* of 15 people. *The Tribune*, 11 May 1939. The Sheikhupura Kisan Committee sent a *jatha* of 100 led by Com. Hayat Mohamed on foot. *The Tribune*, 23 May 1939. The Kapurthala Praja Mandal sent a *jatha* of 100. *The Tribune*, 29 May 1939. Hoshiarpur District planned a *jatha* led by Harjap Singh, MLA, at the end of June. *The Tribune*, 30 May 1939. From Gurdaspur, Comrade Shiv Kumar Sharda came with a *jatha* of 100 peasants. *The Tribune*, 12 June 1939. *Jathas* of 100 each were reported to be coming from Hoshiarpur and Sheikhupura. *The Tribune*, 16 June 1939. A *jatha* of 20 from Lyallpur was arrested at Lahore on 2 July. *The Tribune*, 3 July 1939. Kisan workers in Gurdaspur were arrested and the Sheikhupura City Congress Committee President and two other Congressmen served notices for alleged incitement of kisans. *The Tribune*, 6 and 7 July 1939. Ujagar Singh Bilga, a prominent Kisan activist of Jullundur District, who was deputed by the Punjab Kisan Committee to Lyallpur to mobilize for the *morcha*, was arrested on 8 July. *The Tribune*, 10 July 1939. A *jatha* of 7 arrested near Lyallpur. *The Tribune*, 13 July 1939. A *jatha* of 16 from Kapurthala arrested. *The Tribune*, 9 September 1939. A *jatha* from Hoshiarpur arrested. *The Tribune*, 19 September 1939.

willingness to contribute to the Morcha was particularly striking given the fact that most of its activists had only recently returned home after serving nine-month long sentences. Before they had any breathing space, they went back for another stint.[171]

The government toughened its stance after the middle of June and arrested a number of leading organizers. It also started the practice of arresting the *jathas* soon after they formed in their own home districts, and thus preventing them from reaching Lahore.[172] Not all, however, could be so easily dissuaded. Comrade Wadhawa Ram, who had recently joined the Kisan Sabha via the Multan tenants' struggle, describes how he was part of a group of 11 who started off for Lahore on hearing that the *morcha* "was getting weak and all those who could manage should reach Lahore to offer arrest". They went all the way through the villages and when they neared Lahore they disguised themselves as shepherds and somehow reached Bradlaugh Hall and contacted the leaders. They were told to offer arrest in a *jatha* of five near the Victoria Statue. They again dispersed, hid in the zoo, and emerged at the appointed time with their flag. "The police stopped us and asked us where we wanted to go. We said we wanted to meet Sikandar Hayat. He is our brother and he has told us to come and meet him wherever we have any difficulty. They tried to persuade us not to insist on going forward, etc., but we persisted and were arrested".[173] In Jullundur, the strategy of only five members of the *jatha* appearing at one time was devised. If they were arrested, another five appeared at the next stage of the journey. This way, even if they were arrested at every stage, at least the last batch of

[171] A few examples to show the kind of support extended by Amritsar peasants and peasant activists: Ram Singh Majitha tells us how after coming out of jail, having spent nine months for Amritsar Morcha, they went back to jail for the Lahore Kisan Morcha (interview). Sohan Singh Narangabadi and Balwant Singh Azad were members of a *jatha* of 30 which went from Tarn Taran to Lahore in April. They went through villages holding meetings as they went (interviews). Dalip Singh Tapiala recalls that he led a *jatha* of 500 till his arrest; then someone else became the leader. He was kept in jail for nine months (interview). From Jhabal, a *jatha* of 25 went to Lahore. *The Tribune*, 24 April 1939. The District Kisan Committee of Amritsar held a very large number of meetings to mobilize support and workers toured the villages. *The Tribune*, 12 and 25 May, 9 June 1939. A *jatha* of 500 was to leave on 17 June. *The Tribune*, 16 June 1939. Kisan leaders, Sohan Singh Bhakna and Pritam Singh Sargodha, were arrested for organizing the Kisan *jatha* from Ajnala. *The Tribune*, 18 June 1939. A big meeting was held at village Marhana addressed by Baba Wasakha Singh and Bibi Raghbir Kaur. At the end of the meeting, a *jatha* was flagged off to Lahore. *The Tribune*, 20 June 1939. This was followed by a series of arrests of leaders and *jatha* members in the district. See *The Tribune*, 22 and 26 June, 2, 3, 5, and 10 July 1939. In the first half of July, of the 140 who courted arrest at Lahore, 108 were from Amritsar. FR(1) July 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/7/1939.

[172] FR(1) and (2) June 1939, FR(1) and (2) July 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/6/1939, 18/7/1939. Letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 21 June, early July and 23 July 1939, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F.125/88, *The Tribune*, 18, 22 June, 2, 3, 7, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 14, 25, 27 July, 10, 16, 20, 23, 28, 31 August 1939.

[173] Interview.

five would offer arrest in Lahore since it would show up only at the last minute.[174]

In fact, towards the last stages of the Morcha, in July and August, Jullundur made the most important contribution. In August, in fact, the only reports of arrests of *jathas* were from Jullundur.[175] One village, Barapind, in Phillaur tehsil, alone had 70 men arrested in the Morcha.[176] It was the first to send *jathas* in early May[177] and its decision in July to send a *jatha* of 100 led to a cache of 60 constables descending on the village to watch the activities of this 100.[178] Village Mahal Ghella sent a *jatha* of 23.[179] Among the other villages that sent *jathas* were Rurki, Sangh Desian, Khankhana, Kharnana, Dosanjh Kalan, Kotli Than Singh, Jandiala. A number of leaders, Lal Singh American, Bhag Singh Canadian, Chanan Singh, Bhai Teja Singh, Sardara Singh, Baba Karam Singh Chima and Sardar Harbans Singh courted arrest in the *jathas*.[180]

The Morcha also received the support of a wide spectrum of political parties, groups and organizations and individuals. The Congress came out in support and the PCC even observed 4 June as Kisan Day.[181] The president of the PCC, Dr Kitchlew, was highly critical of the Unionist attitude to the agitation.[182] The Akalis, too, lent support and even sent a *jatha* to court arrest. They were willing to send more but the Kisan Committee was reluctant to accept Akali support and cold-shouldered the offer. Nevertheless, they continued to express support in meetings, etc., no doubt because they feared a loss of influence if they were isolated at this juncture since most of the peasant participants were Sikhs.[183] The Punjab Socialist Party extended full support.[184] The All-India Kisan Sabha supported the Morcha, and N.G. Ranga was particularly active in issuing statements in solidarity with the struggling peasants. He even declared 4 June as Punjab Kisan Satyagraha Day to be observed by *kisans* all over the

[174] *The Tribune*, 1 August 1939.

[175] See *The Tribune* for the month of August 1939.

[176] Interview with Jwala Singh Barapind, a kisan activist belonging to the village.

[177] *The Tribune*, 3 and 5 May 1939.

[178] *The Tribune*, 6 and 7 July 1939.

[179] *The Tribune*, 20 May 1939.

[180] See *The Tribune*, 30 May, 8, 9, 10, 12, 13, 25 and 27 July, 1, 3, 10, 11, 16, 20, 23, 28, 31 August and 7 September 1939.

[181] FR(2) March 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/3/1939; *The Tribune*, 30 May and 13 June 1939; interviews with Master Hari Singh and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

[182] *The Tribune*, 22 June 1939.

[183] The Akalis had organized a Kisan Fauj in early April, apparently frightened by the thought of losing ground to the Communists. They even met the premier in a deputation around the same time as the Kisan Committee deputation in mid-April. They continued to publicly offer support to the Morcha in conferences. See *The Tribune*, 18 and 19 April and 12 June 1939, FR(1) and 2 April 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/4/1939.

[184] *The Tribune*, 3 April, 16 May 1939.

country.[185] The Labour Federation of Amritsar and trade unions in Jullundur offered support.[186] Students of Lahore took out their own *jatha*.[187] Even the police, at least those sections that came in daily contact with the *satyagrahis*, were sympathetic, as shown by Wadhawa Ram's account. He narrates that after their arrest they were put in a closed van and taken off to the lock-up. "On the way, whenever the van would be about to pass through a crowded area, the policemen would signal to us to start shouting slogans. We couldn't see outside as the van was a closed one but they could and they would tell us when to start shouting slogans so that those outside could hear us".[188]

On 28 August 1939, a deputation of Kisan leaders again met the premier in an attempt to find a way out of the situation.[189] In August, repression in the home districts of the *jathas* had resulted in the Morcha in Lahore being virtually dead.[190] Among the districts, only Jullundur continued to show signs of life.[191] It was unlikely that the government would grant any major concessions at this stage of the movement. The premier, it seems, merely gave some assurances about investigating grievances and agreed only to release the rank and file of the prisoners, and not the activists.[192] In the circumstances, the Kisan Committee unilaterally withdrew the Morcha in the last week of September though it continued to project that it had actually won some demands.[193] Only the rank and file of prisoners, many of whom had in any case run out their terms, were released, while political activists were generally left to run their full terms.[194]

Even its critics, however, acknowledge that the Morcha had a powerful impact on the peasant movement in Punjab. The Kisan Committee was recognized as a force in the province. The cause of the peasants received great publicity and the influence spread to hitherto unaffected areas such as Campbellpur, Kangra and Gujarat.[195] The government was restrained

[185] *The Tribune,* 5 April, 8 and 22 May, 3 June 1939.

[186] *The Tribune,* 12 April and 11 August 1939.

[187] Interview with Jagjit Singh Anand.

[188] Interview.

[189] FR(1) September 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1939; Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 13 September 1939, *Linlithgow Papers,* Mss. Eur. F. 125/88; *The Tribune,* 29 August 1939.

[190] See FR(1) and (2) August 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/8/1939; and *The Tribune* for the month of August 1939.

[191] See *The Tribune* for the month of August 1939.

[192] Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 13 September 1939, *Linlithgow Papers,* Mss. Eur. F. 125/88; *All India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, 1939–40*, Appendix B, Report of the Punjab Kisan Movement, March 1939 to February 1940.

[193] *All-India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, 1939–40,* Appendix B, *Ibid.*

[194] FR(1) and (2) September 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/9/1939; Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 13 September 1939. *Linlithgow Papers,* Mss. Eur. F. 125/88.

[195] *All-India Kisan Sabha, Annual Report, 1939–40,* Appendix B, Report of Punjab Kisan Movement, March 1939 to February 1940.

from increasing the revenue in other areas.[196] And most important, a very large number of cadre was generated by the movement.[197] This was an important achievement and also proof that the movement had aroused genuine enthusiasm among the peasants, because cadre is only generated in such an upsurge. According to Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, several district-level Congressmen gravitated to the Communist movement as a result of this Morcha.[198]

It does seem, however, that the Morcha was nevertheless not able to arouse much interest and enthusiasm among the general public. Even if we compare it with the Amritsar Morcha—which was able to evoke considerable interest, sympathy and support from the general public of Amritsar City, with daily public meetings being held for a number of days and large crowds following the *satyagrahis*—the difference is quite striking. Harkishen Singh Surjeet feels that their inability to use this movement for greater publicity among other sections of society was because of immaturity.[199] But this would not explain the difference with Amritsar. Perhaps this was a result of the fact that the initial *lathi*-charge in Amritsar had aroused a lot of anger and sympathy or perhaps it was a consequence of the fact that the Amritsar Morcha was jointly led by the Kisan Committee, the Akalis and the Congress, and all had contributed their mite. The relative lack of support from other sections was one reason the government could ignore the Morcha for so long and in the end also refuse to concede anything substantial.

This does not detract from the other criticism that perhaps the right time to enter into a settlement was mid-April when the Morcha was still going strong and the government was willing to come to a settlement. In April, the government had at least offered to release all the prisoners, in September it did not even do that. Besides, it had accepted the most important immediate demand—that non-agriculturist political activists could legitimately represent peasants and Yog Raj was allowed to lead the deputation. Again, if one compares with the Amritsar Kisan Morcha, one can see the wisdom of the agreement entered into by the leadership in Amritsar after 20 days of struggle before the enthusiasm began to wane. In the case of Lahore, the Morcha was allowed to drag on endlessly and purposelessly, in the process exposing all the weaknesses of the movement to public view—something a wise leadership always avoids. Perhaps the Communists were paying the cost of their unthinking criticism of the Congress leadership for entering into negotiations and making compromises with the rulers. Having

[196] *Ibid.;* interviews with Master Hari Singh and Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

[197] Interviews with Master Hari Singh, Dalip Singh Tapiala and Chhajju Mal Vaid.

[198] Interview.

[199] Interview.

got into the habit of seeing all compromise or settlement with the government as surrender and proof of vacillation towards imperialism, they could not themselves conduct negotiations and arrange compromises even when these were necessary for the movements they led. The role of leaders is not only to initiate and lead struggles, they also have to find ways and means of bringing them to respectable conclusions—since all struggles cannot end in victory. The Communist leadership of the Punjab peasant movement was able to perform the first task but failed in the equally important second task.

Six

Anti-War, People's War and Post-War: Communists and Peasants, 1939–47

The outbreak of the Second World War on 1 September 1939 ushered in a period of turmoil, of uncertainty, of repression and of sharp changes in political line for the peasant movement in Punjab as in the rest of the country. The orderly growth that had been possible in the previous few years was no longer possible once the Defence of India Rules (DIR) came into existence since that meant that the sword of Damocles always hung over one's head. Though in practice the government did not order a major swoop till June 1940, political activists were wary from the time of the beginning of the war, especially since most of them were carrying on anti-war propaganda and also because sporadic arrests did take place.[1] The peasant movement was also initially handicapped by the fact of a large number of its leaders being in jail till December 1939 or January 1940, serving their terms for the Lahore Morcha.[2] Nevertheless, a considerable amount of political activity, both open and underground, was carried on and its chief focus at this stage was anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda.

Riding the Wave: Anti-War Movement, 1939–41

Anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda had been carried on in a vigorous fashion in Punjab since late 1937. Yusuf Meherally had set the tone in a speech at Amritsar on 3 September 1937 when he declared that "in the event of a World War not a single man or a single pie would be provided to the British Government by the Indians". Around the same time, Professor N.G. Ranga, addressing a series of Socialist meetings in Jullundur District,

[1] See *The Tribune*, 4 and 27 September, 16 October 1939, 29 March, 25 and 30 April, 20 May and 7 June 1940, for reports of arrests of activists before the big operation in June 1940.
[2] Some Lahore Kisan Morcha prisoners were still in jail in February 1940. See *The Tribune*, 1 February 1940.

had advised the people to render no help in case of a war. This theme had then been repeated at the two big kisan conferences held around that time, one at Barapind in Jullundur, which was addressed by Swami Satyanand and the other at Nowshera Punuan in Amritsar, which was addressed by Jayaprakash Narayan. Anti-war propaganda was then given a big fillip at the massive conference held at Gardhiwala on 11 October 1937 when Jawaharlal Nehru talked of the clouds of war hovering over the world and how India should make use of these troubled times to set her own house in order. Nehru had followed this up with a special visit to Shahpur District, a major recruiting area, where he made anti-recruitment speeches. In November of that year, an organization called the League against Fascism and War was founded in Lahore, which organized an Anti-war Day on which meetings were held in eight districts. From 1 April to 15 December 1937, a total of 115 persons had made anti-war speeches at 71 meetings in the province. Apparently, this had already affected recruitment since the recruiting officer, Lahore Area, complained in May 1937 of a falling off in the number of recruits in the districts of Sheikhupura, Gujranwala and Shahpur due to anti-military propaganda.[3]

There was a further spurt in 1938, with about 300 speeches being made between 1 January and 31 September, at meetings and conferences all over the province by Congress, Congress Socialists, Kisan Committees and Ahrars. There was hardly any leader of note who had not made anti-war speeches; and most of the meetings were in rural areas.[4] This continued increasing till September 1939,[5] when the War broke out and a large number of arrests under the DIR led to a decline in open propaganda.

Underground propaganda, however, continued, and in this the Communists and Socialists were particularly active. The Congress Socialist Party at its meeting on 9 September decided to send volunteers to all recruitment centres as soon as recruitment began and also to send its activists for intensive ant-recruitment propaganda in the recruitment areas.[6] The Communist Party of India, as part of its overall plan of underground work prepared in order to forestall the possibility of all-out repression, had appointed in Punjab a committee of three headed by Ferozuddin Mansur to arrange

[3] Note on Anti-Militarist Propaganda in Punjab by the Punjab CID, dated 16 December 1937, *H.P.* F. 58/38.

[4] Intelligence Reports on Anti-War and Anti-Recruitment Propaganda in Punjab, first half of January, first and second half of March, April, first and second half of May, first and second half of June, first and second half of July, first and second half of August, first and second half of September, October, first and second half of November and first half of December 1938, *H.P.* F. 58/38.

[5] Intelligence Reports on Anti-War and Anti-Recruitment Propaganda in Punjab from March to September 1939, *H.P.* F. 61/39.

[6] Intelligence Reports on Anti-War and Anti-Recruitment Propaganda in Punjab for September 1939, *H.P.* F. 61/39.

for the issue of anti-war literature and to conduct propaganda among troops and police. The CPI group in Punjab (Sohan Singh Josh, Karam Singh Mann, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, etc.) brought out the *Communist* in Urdu and Gurumukhi and the Kirti group brought out *Lal Jhanda*. The Communist group also brought out leaflets titled *Ailan-I-Jang* in which there was a strong anti-war message. Copies of these were found thrown in the Regimental Lines of the 19th Lancers in Lahore. The Students Federation also carried on anti-war propaganda in rural areas.[7] A report dated 29 October 1940 talked of "organized approaches ... being made to the families and relations of serving soldiers and prospective recruits, and their imagination being stirred with exaggerated accounts of the dangers of overseas service".[8] Underground workers continued to hold small meetings of 30, 40 or 50 people in villages where anti-war propaganda was carried out. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, for example, worked underground for over a year in this fashion, and so did Karam Singh Mann, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Ram Singh Majithia, Dalip Singh Jauhal, etc.[9]

The impact of this tremendous effort at anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda could be seen in the response to the recruitment in the central Punjab districts. The governor was continually complaining of the shortage of Jat Sikh recruits and impressing on all his Sikh visitors the necessity for stimulating recruitment.[10] He believed that this was due to the "anti-Government propaganda carried on for so many years by the Akalis on one side and the Communists on the other".[11] The Akalis under Master Tara Singh had already moved away from the Congress on the question of Sikh enlistment in the army (refusing to accept the Congress position of "hands-off the war"). They were now wooed by the government to do their bit for encouraging enlistment. While they were understandably reluctant

[7] A note on "Communism in India—a survey of recent developments (to 31–10–1939)", *H.P.* F.7/7/39; "A summary of recent information relating to C.P.I. activity for October 1940", *H.P.* F. 7/1/41.

[8] *Ibid*.

[9] Interviews. Sushila Chain, who joined the Kirti Party in 1940, recalls how she first started getting *Lal Jhanda*, the underground newspaper, in Pathankot. Then there were anti-war posters all over the town (interview). Darbara Singh also recalls how he, as a Congress worker, carried on anti-recruitment propaganda during the War and prevented recruitment when recruiting parties came around. He then set up a *khaddar* shop as a cover for his anti-war propaganda. At night he would write anti-war posters in hand and paste them within a radius of 10–15 miles and during the day would sell khaddar (interview). In Jullundur and Hoshiarpur, a government report said Babbar Akalis and Communists were engaged in subversive, anti-war propaganda. Two deserters from the army were at large, one killed an informer while the other was arrested. FR(2) April 1940, *H.P.* F. 18/4/40.

[10] See letters from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Linlithgow, Viceroy, India, dated 16 October, and 15 November, 1940 and 13 January, and 10 February 1941 , *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/89 and 90.

[11] Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, 15 November 1940, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/89.

to publicly come out in support of recruitment, they did supply six or seven *parcharaks* or paid propagandists to the Khalsa Defence of India League, an organization set up in January 1941 by an All-Parties Sikh Conference with the support of the Maharaja of Patiala and Sir Jogendra Singh and the covert support of the Akalis. The work done by these propagandists in preaching recruitment in the villages, particularly in the Amritsar District, which was the worst affected, was reported to be quite effective.[12] Even after this "improvement", however, the supply still fell quite short of the demand. "The total demand for March, including the shortage in February, was 484 Jat Sikhs and 656 other Sikhs. The actual recruitment up to the 10th of March was only 62 of each class or 124 in all". These figures pertained to the Lahore recruiting area.[13] That the task of the Khalsa Defence of India League and other similar organizations that tried to encourage recruitment among Sikhs was not easy is evident from the fact that they dared not openly give a call for support to the British War effort and had to clothe their message in the garb of an appeal to defend the motherland, promote Indianization of the Army and maintain the Sikh position in the Army.[14] Master Tara Singh, too, was soon embarrassed by the public knowledge of his support to the Khalsa Defence of India League and tried to divert public attention to other populist issues.[15]

Trouble among serving soldiers was also thought to be the result of "bad influence in their homes". In July 1940, a mutiny in the Central India Horse was found to have been led by a man who was the nephew of a well-known Communist agitator recently externed from Bihar for causing labour unrest in Jamshedpur. Another man who was involved in trouble in the army in Egypt was Sadhu Singh, brother of state prisoner Wasdev Singh. Investigations into the trouble in Egypt and elsewhere revealed that the Meerut centre of "Kirti" magazine was the source from which the propaganda emanated.[16]

[12] Craik wrote to Linlithgow on 13 January 1941 that "Sikh recruitment is still very unsatisfactory. I had a talk the other day with Short, one of the Liaison Officers working under General Haughton. Short is in close touch with several of the Akali leaders and particularly Master Tara Singh. According to Short, Tara Singh and his party are genuinely anxious to stimulate recruitment, but are afraid to come out in the open themselves, as they fear that by doing so they would be attacked as reactionaries and supporters of Government. They are, however, willing to supply Agents and propaganda for a recruiting effort". Craik to Linlithgow, 13 January 1941, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/90. Also, letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 10 February, 28 February, 3 and 4 March 1941, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/90.

[13] Letter from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 17 march 1941, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/90.

[14] See *The Tribune*, 20 January, 28 January, 10 March 1941.

[15] Letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 3, 4 and 7 March 1941, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/90.

[16] Handwritten letters from Craik to Linlithgow, dated 31 July and 22 August 1940, and a note by J.D. Anderson, Joint Chief Secretary, Punjab on the Conference held at Army HQ on 29 July 1940, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F.125/89. Also see *H.P.* F. 94/13/40 and F. 161/40 for reports on soldiers "infected" by Kirtis and action to be taken against them, etc.

Apart from the major theme of anti-war and anti-recruitment propaganda, political activity among the peasants continued on the by-now-familiar lines of enrolment of members, formation of kisan committees, the holding of meetings at which the longstanding demands as well as any new or immediate demands such as relief in revenue due to damage to crops by hailstorms, etc., were voiced and the holding of big conferences after every few months in each area at which provincial and even national-level leaders addressed large audiences. Amritsar, Jullundur and Lyallpur continued to remain in the lead and very active.[17] The Punjab Kisan Committee held its annual organizational elections with 425 out of the 500 delegates being present at a meeting in Amritsar in February 1940 to elect the office bearers. Santa Singh of Gandawind was elected president, Mir Dad Khan of Campbellpore vice-president, Kartar Singh Gill became general secretary, and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia treasurer.[18] The All-India Kisan Sabha also honoured Punjab by electing Sohan Singh Bhakna as its president in place of Rahul Sankritayan who was arrested under DIR.[19]

Arrests and detentions of kisan activists had been continuing ever since the outbreak of the War, but in June 1940, in one swoop, 84 Communists were arrested in Punjab, including five MLAs. There were raids on the Bradlaugh Hall in Lahore and in houses in towns and villages all over the province. The reasons given were their increasingly subversive and anti-war activities and that they tried to tamper with the loyalty of the army, created labour trouble, encouraged terrorists, exploited local grievances and disseminated alarmist rumours, distributed virulent and violently-worded pamphlets and news-sheets issued by their secret propaganda organization urging people to rise and overthrow British imperialism and capitalism. They were detained under Rule 26 of the DIR.[20]

The arrests and detentions of so many political leaders at one go led to a big outcry in the province. The Working Committee of the Provincial

[17] For example, a District Political Conference was held at Lyallpur in December 1939 with Mian Iftikhar-ud-din in the chair, and Dr Gopi Chand, Sampuran Singh and other MLAs present. *The Tribune*, 24 December 1939. There were also reports of meetings of kisans throughout the district to demand remission of land revenue and water rates in view of failure of the present cotton crop. *The Tribune*, 8 December 1939. The DCC Hissar organised a big Kisan Conference with Neki Ram Sharma presiding. *The Tribune*, 13 January 1940. Organizational elections of committees were held in Lyallpur and Jullundur. *The Tribune*, 6, 16 and 26 February 1940. Ambala held a District Political Conference with Bibi Raghbir Kaur in the chair. *The Tribune*, 28 February 1940. In Amritsar, a series of conferences were organized in villages Jubbalpore, Kasel, Dadrai Jhanjhoti, Verka, Isa Rur, Chamunda Devi, Wallah, etc. *The Tribune*, 16, 17, 26, 30 March, 4, 9, 17 April, 22 May and 1 June 1940. Thousands attended a political conference in Hoshiarpur at Kotli Hyatpur, *The Tribune*, 18 June 1940. Trouble broke out again in Chuharchak over collection of punitive police tax. *The Tribune*, 12 May 1940.

[18] *The Tribune*, 29 February and 1 March 1940.

[19] *The Tribune*, 30 March 1940.

[20] FR (2) June 1940, *H.P.* F. 18/6/40; *The Tribune*, 28 and 29 June, 2 July 1940.

Congress Committee condemned these arrests as an attack on the Congress and said that they had the savour of Nazi methods.[21] From the villages, too, came reports of protests. The village of Dader had observed a spontaneous and complete hartal when Sant Baba Wasakha Singh, President of the Desh Bhagat Pariwar Sahaik Committee, was arrested on 27 June, and had taken out a huge procession to condemn the repression.[22] In early July, large numbers of villages observed protest days, especially in Amritsar and Jullundur.[23] In September, the prisoners who were kept in Montgomery jail went on hunger-strike to demand better conditions, and there was a wave of sympathy expressed in numerous public meetings in villages in many areas, with the Congress giving full organizational and other support to the campaign. This resulted in the Congress leader Dr Gopi Chand being allowed to visit the prisoners in jail and persuade them to withdraw their hunger strike.[24] Arrests, detentions, attachments of property of absconders, continued unabated.[25] In December 1940, two major "absconders", Harkishen Singh Surjeet and Karam Singh Mann were caught; the former was reportedly the key man in the underground set-up in the province.[26] The figure for persons detained without trial was highest for Punjab in September 1940; 75 out of a total of 237 for all-India.[27]

Meanwhile, in October 1940, the Congress had launched the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement. Gandhiji's idea was to express Indian resentment at being forced into the War without her consent and yet to express it in such a way that it did not obstruct the Allied war effort. He had therefore chosen the method of individual rather than mass protest, where pre-selected individuals would register their protest by giving a set speech saying that Indians would not aid the war effort. This was also a protest against war-time restrictions on civil liberties and the speech was designed to offer civil disobedience by violating the law banning such anti-war propaganda. The left wing, as is common knowledge, thought Gandhiji should not restrict this movement to "individuals", but make it a mass affair. They had been spoiling for a fight ever since the outbreak of the War, and failed to understand the subtleties of Gandhian strategy and tactics—being more used to their own sharp swings and turns, from outright opposition to the War to total support. But we are anticipating the future here.

[21] FR(2) June 1940, *H.P.* F. 18/6/40.
[22] *The Tribune*, 29 June 1940.
[23] *The Tribune*, 8, 9, 15 July 1940.
[24] *The Tribune*, 22, 23, 24, 29 September 1940; FR(1) and (2) September 1940, *H.P.* F. 18/9/40.
[25] See *The Tribune*, 21 July, 14, 23, 25 and 28 October, 8 and 10 November, 16 and 25 December, 1940, 9, 13, 23 and 25 January, 8, 11 and 28 June, 24 July and 14 September 1941.
[26] Interviews with Karam Singh Mann and Harkishen Singh Surjeet, FR(1) December 1940, *H.P.* F. 18/12/40; *H.P.* F. 7/1/41, Report for November 1940.
[27] *H.P.* F. 19/1/40.

In Punjab, too, the left wing kept up a constant refrain, demanding of Gandhiji that he transform individual satyagraha into mass satyagraha.[28] They participated actively in the Satyagraha training camp held in June 1940 to prepare for the movement.[29] And in the rural areas, they evolved a method that would transform it into a mass affair while remaining within the confines of Congress policy. According to the Congress injunction, prior notice of the date, time and place of the satyagraha had to be given to the authorities. In practice, what happened was that the police often arrested the *satyagrahi* even before he could give his speech. To circumvent this, the left wing activists would hide the *satyagrahi* after giving the notice. Meanwhile, they would organize a big public meeting at the proposed site of the satyagraha, collecting thousands of people from neighbouring villages. When the audience had all assembled and the police was also waiting, the *satyagrahi* would be smuggled on to the stage, usually in some disguise, often of a woman. Surrounded by all the activists on the stage and by an admiring audience of thousands, the police would hardly dare to reach him and he would make his speech at leisure, and so would all the others. The police would be allowed to make their arrests only after the entire proceedings had been gone through. Needless to add, this form of satyagraha, involving as it did a lot of hide and seek with the police, generated a lot of excitement and proved quite popular with rural audiences.[30]

The Individual Satyagraha which had provided an excellent opportunity for rural mobilization peaked around February—March 1941 and declined

[28] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 15 February, 2 and 3 March, 13 April, 20 June, 24 July, 6 August and 13 September 1941.

[29] See FR(1) June 1940, *H.P*. F. 18/6/40.

[30] Interviews with Chhajju Mal Vaid, Wadhawa Ram, Sohan Singh Narangabadi and Narain Singh Shahbazpuri. Sohan Singh Narangabadi describes in his interview the manner in which Bibi Raghbir Kaur, MLA, offered satyagraha: "We brought Bibi Raghbir Kaur from her house in Lahore to the village, kept her hidden, organised a big function, got 200–300 women, all with their faces covered with veils, to surround her and take her to the function. They formed a cordon around her at the meeting as well. Our aim was that the arrest would take place only after the speech, not before, as the police usually tried to do. We told the police to stay at the back; they couldn't come forward anyway because of the cordon of women. There were at least 10,000 people in this gathering. We had mobilised in all the surrounding villages. There was a lot of enthusiasm among the people. We conducted other satyagrahas also in similar fashion." Narain Singh Shahbazpuri's description of his own satyagraha is also worth quoting: "I got signatures of 300 people for Individual Civil Disobedience. Then I offered satyagraha. At least 20 to 30,000 people collected for the event held in a big Gurdwara in Shahbazpur. Gandhiji had also said that the *satyagrahi* must be garlanded by the eldest person in the house. In my house, my mother being dead, only my wife was there and her father had just died. That same day was his *samskar*. So she came back after the *samskar* to garland me. The police wanted to arrest me before I made my speech and shouted the slogan 'No money, no men, for the British'. At this, our village Nihangs took out their *kirpans*. Finally, I was arrested and sent to jail." Interview. Also see *The Tribune*, 24 July, 1941.

thereafter.[31] In April, there was a big agitation by the Punjab Beopar Mandal or Traders' Association against the General Sales Tax Act and the Punjab Agricultural Produce Markets Act, 1939, the latter being due to come into force on April 15.[32] This agitation, which involved hartals by the trading community, led to disruption of the agricultural produce markets and thus to demands by the peasants and their organizations that revenue collection be postponed till the agitation was over as prices were too low.[33] This was followed up in June 1941 with a powerful agitation for better conditions for prisoners at the Deoli Camp Jail where left-wing activists from all over India had been kept. The week from 16–23 June 1941 was observed as Detenus Week. Along with the CSP and the CPI, the Punjab Kisan Committee participated fully in this and daily village meetings were reported by the District Kisan Committees of Amritsar and Ferozepore.[34] The Congress was extremely active in the rural areas of Kangra and Rohtak during this period, in the latter protesting against forced subscriptions to the War Fund.[35]

In September, the PKC decided to hold its annual Provincial Kisan Conference at Fatehgarh in Ferozepore District from 18–22 September. The announcement led to a spate of internments and arrests, with about 40 kisan workers being affected. The PKC also decided to take it as a challenge, and the Conference was held, on the banks of the river Sutlej, with *jathas* after *jathas* crossing the river to join the meeting. The police would arrest the president-elect of the Conference from the head of the procession and a new one would be appointed. In this way, more than 10 presidents were arrested but the procession continued.[36] The Conference had been preceded by an intense campaign of mobilization in and around the Ferozepore District by the younger cadre who were outside the jail.[37] This was followed by

[31] F R(1) and (2) February, FR(1) and (2) March, FR(1) and (2) April 1941, *H.P.* F. 18/2/41, 18/3/41, 18/4/41; *The Tribune*, 4, 13 and 27 January, 1, 19, and 26 March, 19 April 1941; *H.P.* F. 3/17/40, 3/17/41 and 3/6/42.

[32] See FR(1) and (2) April, FR(1) and (2) May, FR(1) June, 1941, *H.P.* F. 18/4/41, 18/5/41, 18/6/41. The date for the Agricultural Produce Markets Act was soon shifted to 15 September but the agitation continued against the sales tax.

[33] *The Tribune*, 19 and 26 May 1941.

[34] FR(2) June 1941, *H.P.* F. 18/6/41; *The Tribune*, 12, 16, 19, 26 May, 2, 10, 15, 19, 20, 21, 25 June 1941.

[35] For Kangra, see *The Tribune*, 27 January, 26 March, 19 April, 19, 20, 28 May, 19 June 1941; and for Rohtak, see *The Tribune*, 22 January and 17 June 1941.

[36] *The Tribune*, 16, 17, 22 and 23 September 1941; FR(1) and (2) September 1941, *H.P.* F. 18/9/41; interviews with Dalip Singh Jauhal, Sushila Chain and Bhagat Singh Bilga.

[37] Sushila Chain, who joined the Kirti Party in 1940, was sent to Ferozepore District to work among women in preparation for this conference. In her interview, she describes vividly her first political experiences as an eighteen-year old woman activist. Her escort was an older woman, Bebe Dhan Kaur, sister of one of the activists, Chanan Singh. At the time warrants of arrest were out for political workers, therefore meetings were not announced in advance. They would hold three meetings a day in different villages, travelling on foot from one village to another. They would hold separate meetings for women in the local gurdwara. The

a number of conferences in Amritsar, Jullundur and Sheikhupura.[38] In January 1942, a new phase began with the adoption of the Peoples' War line by the CPI which had direct repercussions on the peasant movement, which shall form the subject of the next section.

The period from September 1939 to the end of 1941 was thus characterized by a strident anti-war political atmosphere which informed all aspects of activity. All political groups were against the War, the only difference being over how strongly to express this opposition. This naturally made for considerable unity and combined effort between Communists, Socialists and Congressmen and between the organizations they ran. In 1939, Sohan Singh Josh, a well-known Communist, was general secretary of the Congress and, in 1940, Mian Iftikhar-ud-din, who, even if not a member of the Communist Party, was as close as one could be to the Communists, was president of the Punjab Congress. Little wonder then that the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee adopted in 1940 almost all the kisan demands proposed by the Punjab peasant movement.[39] It also appointed a Kisan Sub-Committee of the PCC with prominent PKC leaders as members.[40] In turn, leaders and workers of the peasant movement played an active role in the Individual Satyagraha and other Congress activities. The arrests of Communists were condemned by the Congress as an attack on itself and full cooperation was extended in the campaigns for better treatment, etc., of detenus. The Unionist ministry's move to pass the Punjab Criminal Law (Second Amendment) Bill in November 1940 which extended the operation of the Act by another five years was condemned by the Congress in the Assembly as an attack on Communists.[41] (We are emphasizing this at least partly because this was the last time we witness this kind of cooperation—

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condition of women in Ferozepore was very bad: no woman would agree to sit in a chair and chair a meeting. So Bebe Dhan Kaur chaired and Sushila spoke. At one such meeting in Fatehgarh Kot, the venue of the proposed provincial conference, a women's meeting was on in a *haveli*, and Sushila was speaking, when a *thanedar* appeared and asked her to come outside. She asked him to speak in front of everyone. He questioned her about her identity which she and Bebe both refused to divulge. Then Bebe made fun of the thanedar by narrating a story about his childhood when she had beaten him up for stealing sugar cane. The *thanedar* left, as in any case he had no warrant and could not arrest her. The impact of this incident was to remove the fear of the police in the area and people flocked to the Fatehgarh Conference. A three-day *langar* was run by the women of the area. Many presidents were arrested and then the Conference was allowed to continue under the presidentship of Gair Singh Chajjar. The Conference was a huge success and she continued to work in that area for eight months.

[38] See *The Tribune*, 24, 27 September, 13 October, 8 November, 22 November and 20 December 1941, 9, 14 and 15 January 1942.

[39] *The Tribune*, 1 June 1940.

[40] Sohan Singh Josh was the chairman of this sub-committee. See *The Tribune*, 8 April 1940.

[41] Extracts from Punjab Legislative Assembly Debates, dated 19 and 22 November 1940, *H.P.* F. 13/1/41.

the Peoples' War and its aftermath put paid to all this for good from 1942 onwards.) As a result, despite the concerted and vicious repression launched against left-wing activists, who were the most active elements in the peasant movement, political activity among the peasants continued at a vigorous pace through 1940 and 1941.

One of the striking features of the movement in this phase was its almost total emphasis on political issues—whether demanding release of prisoners of the Lahore Morcha, or of the detenus, or better treatment for them, or the whole gamut of anti-war propaganda, including the Individual Satyagraha campaign, almost all the issues were political.[42] The focus on economic demands was relatively minor—with some agitation around relief in land revenue, etc., on account of hailstorms or the traders' strike or some other immediate issue. And the movement was no less vigorous for that reason—thus placing a big question-mark on the oft-repeated assertion that the peasants—or the masses or the poor—respond only to economic issues. Again, it is to be marked that all this mobilization and activity occurred without any "*morchas*" or "struggles"—again indicating that vigorous political activity and politicization is possible without "struggles" and certainly without violence.

Against the Tide: People's War, Pakistan and Khalistan, 1941–45

Hitler's attack on the Soviet Union on 22 June 1941 threw the left wing in India into a state of confusion.[43] The Anglo-Soviet Alliance that followed created problems about how to characterise the War. Was it now an Imperialist War or not? There was nobody who was willing to give a clear answer. The top leaders were in jail and even they, it seems, were really waiting for instructions from the Comintern and the Communist Party of Great Britain.[44] In the meantime, those outside did what they thought best. At some meetings of peasants in Jullundur and Amritsar districts during July to September, the release of Communists and Socialists was urged on the ground that the government should prove its anti-fascist credentials and give them an opportunity to help the Soviet Union.[45]

[42] Sohan Singh Narangabadi, in his interview, made a special point of this aspect.

[43] For a general discussion of Peoples' War, etc. see Overstreet and Windmiller, *Communism in India*, Bombay, 1960.

[44] The "Survey of Communist Activity in India for August 1941" reported that there was no change yet in the anti-war attitude, but it seemed as if the leaders were waiting for a directive from outside. There was disagreement in the British Communist Party, with Rajni Palme Dutt taking the line that the Indian question was important and separate and should not be dismissed for the sake of a United Front with Churchill. *H.P.* F. 7/1/41.

[45] The first meeting at which support was extended to the Soviet Union in its struggle was at village Palsa in Jullundur District at the end of July 1941. See *The Tribune*, 28 July 1941. Another

By December, the situation became clearer with the change in line being declared officially by the CPI. This at least put an end to the absurd formulations such as the war being an Imperialist War in the west and a Peoples' War in the east.[46] In Punjab, the adoption of this line by the CPI group was never in doubt once the CPI at the national level adopted it. But what about the Kirti group, who were in a majority? Would not their strong nationalist orientation, born out of their origins in the Ghadar party, make the acceptance of such a line, which spelt cooperation with the British in India, very difficult for them? In the normal course, it is very likely that this scenario would have been true. But the Kirtis had only recently, in the Deoli camp, where all the national-level leadership of the CPI had been present, worked out a compromise with the CPI group by which they had accepted organizational unity and the discipline of the CPI. The propelling factor had undoubtedly been the strong Marxist tenet that there could be only one "legitimate" Communist Party in one country. It was an uneasy unity, which never really worked in practice, and was given up even in theory again a few years later. But the timing of this new-found unity resulted in the Kirtis going against their grain and accepting the Peoples' War line.[47] The Kirtis accepting it meant that the Punjab Kisan Committee, which had a majority of Kirtis on it, would also follow this line. In any case, the All-India Kisan Sabha, too, adopted the same line in February 1942, thus making it almost inevitable that the Punjab Kisan Committee would follow suit.[48]

On 1 May 1942, as a result of the understanding between the CPI and the Government of India, eight major Communists of Punjab were released. They were Teja Singh Swatantar, the chief leader of the Kirti group, Achhar Singh Chhina (the Kirti leader who had brought the message of Peoples' War from the Soviets to the Indian Communist leaders in jail) and Bhagat Singh Bilga, another major Kirti leader. The other five belonged to the CPI

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meeting in Amritsar District following this demanded proof of British government's anti-fascist policy by way of release of Socialists and Communists. *The Tribune*, 29 July 1941. Other meetings followed. See *The Tribune*, 30 July, 12, 19 August, 11 September 1941.

[46] See "Survey of Communist Activity in India for October 1941", *H.P.* F. 7/1/41; and FR (2) September 1941, *H.P.* F. 18/9/41.

[47] Bhagat Singh Bilga explained this at great length in his interview. According to him, for the sake of this unity, Teja Singh Swatantar, the leader of the Kirtis, kept his differences to himself. In any case, he says, the CPI leaders had a feeling that the Kirtis' anti-imperialism was stronger than their communism; that their communism was "different". It wasn't different, says Bilga, "but it was also anti-British. And may be that wasn't such a bad thing in a slave country", he adds (interview). For the Kirti-Communist merger, see also "A note on the Progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942", enclosed with the letter from F.C. Bourne, Chief Secretary, Punjab, to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 5 July 1944, dealing with the policy towards Communists. *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W.

[48] FR(2) March 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/3/42.

group: Sohan Singh Josh, Karam Singh Gill, Fazal Ilahi Qurban, Feroz-ud-din Mansoor and Iqbal Singh Hundal. Their release led to a major effort at reorganization, since the repression of the last two years had completely disrupted the whole structure. In June, P.C. Joshi, the general secretary of the CPI, came to Punjab and helped organize the provincial committee of the party, allot work, etc. Study circles and conferences were held to spread the new line. The ban on the Communist Party was lifted in July 1942. An open party was to be set up for the first time.[49]

Meanwhile, the PKC, in a meeting attended by 450 workers in late May, had already given directions for the political line to be followed. All kisan workers were to support the War effort, demand a national government and release of security prisoners and try to capture the Congress.[50] In the initial wave of enthusiasm for the new line, a number of conferences were held at which pro-war propaganda, including appeals to join the army and make it a national army were made.[51] But opposition from the Congress and the Socialists soon began to tell on the morale of the activists. In Rawalpindi, the Congress Socialists disrupted the Detenus Release Conference organized by BPL Bedi and Sohan Singh Josh.[52] In the rural areas, the Congress and the Akalis are reported to have spread the story that the Communists had purchased their release from jail on promise of support to the war effort.[53] The Lahore CSP had dissolved itself to be able to purge the Communists.[54] Elsewhere, too, there were reports of the Congress throwing out the Communists.[55] As a result, there was some softening of the pro-war edge and some strengthening of the anti-government tone of Communist propaganda.[56]

The Quit India Movement which started on 9 August 1942 further queered the pitch for the Communists. In keeping with their line, they declared it to be a policy of "national suicide". It did not help much that they simultaneously blamed the government for precipitating the present crisis and demanded the release of the national leaders and opening of negotiations for a national government.[57] They also followed a

[49] FR(1) May 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/5/42; Central Intelligence Officer, Lahore's F.R. for the second half of April 1942, *H.P.* F. 226/42; "A note on the progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942", *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W.

[50] FR(2) May 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/5/42.

[51] FR(2) June and FR(1) July 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/6/42 and 18/7/42.

[52] FR(1) June 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/6/42.

[53] FR(1) July 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/7/42.

[54] FR(1) March 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/3/42.

[55] FR(1) July 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/7/42. For hostility from Congress and Congress Socialists and Akalis, also see *The Tribune*, 12, 15, 17 June and 3 August 1942, and FR(1) May 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/5/42.

[56] FR(2) May and FR(1) June 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/5/42 and 18/6/42.

[57] FR(1) August 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/8/42.

policy of dissuading peasants from participating in any acts of violence or sabotage.[58]

Much more important than what they did, however, was what they did not do. It was by not giving a lead to the peasants to participate in the Quit India Movement that the Communists, along with the Akalis, ensured that the movement never really took off in rural Punjab. The Congress in the rural areas of central Punjab comprised basically of these two political groups, and in 1942 both of them were aiding the British in the war-effort. Master Tara Singh had taken away the major chunk of the Akalis to protect the Sikh position in the army and get ministerships for Sikhs and the Communists took away most of what remained of the rural activists to fight the Soviet Union's Peoples' War. In most villages, this meant that there were no other nationalist forces left to give the lead. As Jagbir Singh Chhina put it: "People do not join a movement only on the basis of principles, they go with individuals. They see who is leading the movement. The people who could lead the Quit India movement were too few. There were no forces who could lead it."[59] It was ironic and tragic indeed that those who were so desperate to convert individual satyagraha into mass satyagraha should have to watch the mass satyagraha fizzle out with their hands tied behind their backs. It was even more ironic that they should have to do this in the case of the only national struggle which adopted methods of struggle with which they had a "natural" affinity: underground organization, sabotage, violence, etc.

Nevertheless, despite the abandonment by the Communists and the Akalis, there were hartals, meetings, *jathas*, demonstrations and violent attempts at derailment of trains, cutting of telegraph wires, etc. The active districts were reported to be Lahore, Amritsar, Ludhiana, Lyallpur, Multan,

[58] FR(1) August 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/8/42. The Punjab government noted with approval that "to the Party's credit must also be placed the fact that during the Congress rebellion of 1942, it stood firmly against sabotage, interruption of communications and any interference with the war effort, although perversely it placed the blame for the disturbances on the Government." Letter from F.C. Bourne, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Secretary, Government of India, dated 5 July 1944, dealing with the policy towards Communists. *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W.

[59] Interview, Ataullah Jahaniah, in his speech as Chairman of the Reception Committee of the All-India Kisan Sabha annual conference at Bhakna in April 1943 was right when he claimed that it was "because of kisan *jathebandi* that Punjab remained free of earthquake that shook other provinces on 9 August." By kisan *jathebandi* he meant clearly Communist influence over peasants. See *The Tribune*, 4 April 1943. That Akalis and Communists were the two political forces capable of leading the peasants in Punjab is also confirmed by the chief secretary's observation in 1945, while discussing the possibilities of the revival of Congress activity, that the danger would be if the Congress rescinded the present ban on the "Communists and Akalis who have a rural organisation capable of causing considerable trouble in the countryside." Letter from F.C. Bourne, Chief Secretary, Punjab to Additional Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, dated 11/14 February 1945. *H.P.* F. 4/7/44.

Karnal, Rohtak and Simla. There were also "unnaturally large number of meetings with huge audiences" in some districts. A lot of illegal literature was distributed. In all, about 1,840 arrests were affected, about 400 more than in the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement.[60] In other words, it was not as if no groundswell existed in Punjab which could be built into a powerful movement if the forces that were capable of providing the leadership had been willing to undertake their historic responsibility.

Resentment at the Communist line towards the Quit India Movement was obviously strong, for the Punjab Kisan Committee quietly ordered its cadre to lie low, postpone all conferences and stop all pro-war propaganda till the "situation improves".[61] Karam Singh Mann recalls that there was so much sympathy for the Quit India Movement in the villages that people would even turn their faces away from Sohan Singh Josh, who was so popular among the peasantry that earlier he would be paraded on a horse and garlanded, etc. Even among pro-Communist workers in Amritsar, says Mann, it was difficult at this time for Communists to hold a meeting without 50 *lathi*-wielding youth to guard them.[62] Jagbir Singh Chhina describes a rural meeting in 1942 where Dalip Singh Tapiala was trying to explain the People's War line. An Akali jathedar of the area, totally uneducated, rose and said: "O Dalip Singh, don't you understand that you are helping the he-cat who has been beating us for 200 years, has been ruling over us for 200 years? You should be ashamed of what you are doing". And people were very happy with this. Jagbir Singh Chhina says that only those who had studied Marxism could understand the People's War line, not ordinary people.[63] In Joginder Singh Chhina's opinion, this line could not be accepted by the kisans because for the last 15–20 years the Kirtis had been telling them to throw out the British by whatever means possible. Also, the fact that the entire national leadership—Nehru, Azad, Gandhi, Patel—was in jail made a difference. People loved them as well, so they would tell the Communists that even if what the Communists say is correct, they cannot accept it.[64] Dalip Singh Tapiala confirms: "When we took the People's War line to the peasantry through meetings, etc., we met with strong opposition. We were hooted".[65]

Popular alienation from the Communists was shown also by the fact that they were able to get hardly any response to their efforts at

[60] For the Quit India Movement in Punjab, see FR(1) and (2) August 1942, FR(1) and (2) September 1942, FR(1) October 1942, *H.P.* F.18/8/42, 18/9/42 and 18/10/42. Also see *H.P.* F.3/30/42 for a brief summary of events from 9 August to 30 September 1942, and *H.P.* 3/33/42, for "Statistical and Factual Information" relating to the Quit India Movement.

[61] FR(2) August 1942, *H.P.* F.18/8/42.

[62] Interview.

[63] Interview.

[64] Interview.

[65] Interview.

mobilization.[66] Two "Unity Weeks" celebrated in November and December were quite unsuccessful except for some meetings in Amritsar District and Lahore.[67] In fact, there was very little sign of any political activity by the Kisan organizations between October 1942 and February 1943.[68] Gandhiji's fast in February 1943 provided an opportunity to come out of hiding and try to build fences with the Congress by organizing meetings under the Communist banner since the Congress could not legally hold meetings. But the government quickly put a ban on meetings and processions, thus bringing that effort to an end.[69] It was only the All-India Kisan Sabha session to be held in April 1943 at Bhakna in Amritsar District that finally galvanized the Kisan Sabha activists into action and they began collecting funds, enrolling members, making preparations. And though Rs 10,000 and 880 maunds of grain were collected for this conference, it failed to generate more than local interest, except among delegates.[70]

From mid-1943, there was a quickening of activity, with more conferences and meetings being reported, especially in Jullundur, Amritsar and Ferozepore. The emphasis shifted to the organization of food committees to deal with the shortages of essential items such as sugar and kerosene in villages. Another slogan was that of "grow more food" to deal with the food crisis in the country. Organizing relief for the victims of the Bengal famine was the third major item. Cultural groups came from Bengal to carry on propaganda for famine relief and help collect money and grain for relief. Their dramatic performances were quite popular in the rural areas and people gave generously.[71] Around the middle of the year there had also been a slight revival of anti-fascist and pro-war propaganda in response to the stricter line advocated at the Bombay Congress of the CPI held from 23 May to 1 June 1943,[72] and the anniversary of Quit India had

[66] In October 1942, it was reported that Communists had given up anti-fascist work and, in the few open meetings held, have laid emphasis on release of national leaders, formation of national government and Congress League unity. Thus, the lack of response came despite their toning down considerably any references to the War effort, etc. See FR(1) and (2) October 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/10/42.

[67] FR(1) November and FR(2) December 1942, *H.P.* F. 18/11/42 and 18/12/42.

[68] See FRs for this period.

[69] FR(1) and (2) February, FR(1) March 1943, *H.P.* F. 18/2/42 and 18/3/43.

[70] FR(2) March, FR(1) April 1943, *H.P.* F. 18/3/43, 18/4/43; *The Tribune*, 4 April 1943, "A note on progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942" *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W.

[71] See FRs from July to December 1943, *H.P.* F. 18/7/43 to 18/12/43; *The Tribune*, 21, 25 June, 6, 11, 13, 23, 26 July, 8 August, 4, 21 September, 16 October, 24 December 1943.

[72] In this Congress, the CPI for the first time openly identified the Congress Socialists and the Forward Bloc with the Fifth Column and gave instructions that Fifth Columnists should be tracked down and exposed. It is possible that in keeping with these instructions, some members of the party actually helped in the process of "exposure". At least this is the impression one gets from the following sentence: "The Party is genuinely opposed to Subhas Chandra Bose and his Fifth-columnists, the Forward Bloc and the Congress Socialist Party

brought forth appeals for peace[73]—but this revival had not lasted very long and the party was soon back to business as usual with a token obeisance to the People's War line, followed up quickly with demands for release of national leaders, more sugar, kerosene, etc.[74]

In September 1943, the annual Provincial Punjab Kisan Conference was held in district Lyallpur in the face of considerable Akali opposition.[75] The Kisan Sabha also tried to get popular attention by concentrating more on criticism of punitive police, police excesses, shortages, etc. It also took up the cause of tenants in a dispute between lessees and tenants in the Haveli project *chaks* of Jhang and Multan. In Jullundur, it supported the kisans in their opposition to the Sugar Control Order which prohibited the manufacture of *gur* within 20 miles of sugar factories, thus resulting in financial losses to them since the prices offered by the sugar factories were not as high as they could get by making *gur*.[76] Membership of the Kisan Sabha

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and has given practical proof of its readiness to co-operate in intelligence plans to expose and arrest them." This was said in the letter written by F.C. Bourne, Chief Secretary, Punjab to the Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, dated 5 July 1944, discussing the need to review policy towards the Communists. *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W. For reports on the Bombay Congress, see Letter from Sir Richard Tottenham, Secretary, Home Department, Government of India, to All Provincial Governments, dated 20 September 1943 (in which he reviewed the policy towards Communists and surveyed Communist activities since June 1942) , and "A note on progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942", *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W. This Congress also accused itself of "Left Nationalist Deviations", "an extraordinary expression (which) covers a realistic appreciation of their failings." In simple words, this meant they had been too critical of the Government. "A note on progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942", *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W.

[73] FR(2) July and FR(1) August 1943, *H.P.* F. 18/7/43 and 18/8/43.

[74] By September, the government reports again acquired an exasperated tone when reporting Communist activities. See FR(1) and (2) September, FR(1) and (2) October 1943, *H.P.* F. 18/9/43 and 18/10/43. Complaining about the very short period for which the resolutions passed in Bombay in May 1943 had any effect, an official report commented: "Unfortunately, however, it is a failing of the Communists, that having indulged in self-criticism of their past mistakes, they consider no further effort is necessary, and their good resolutions were stillborn. Instead of really tracking down and exposing fifth columnists, the Party developed the habit of calling all its opponents by this name, including Government itself. Instead of honestly inspiring anti-Fascist views in the minds of soldiers, they made a few undesirable contacts, in which anti-British and pro-Communist propaganda was the chief element. In the towns more and more open propaganda on behalf of Congress has been done and in rural areas pro-war and anti-Fascist propaganda has given place to every form of agitation which they consider likely to increase their influence and popularity." "A note on progress made by the Communist Party of Punjab, since May 1942", *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W.

[75] FR(1) October 1943, *H.P.* F. 18/10/43; "A note on the progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942", *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W.

[76] FR(1) December 1943, *H.P.* F. 18/12/43. "Kisan workers have taken up every kind of grievance which they consider might extend their influence in rural areas, such as dispute between landlords and tenants, requisitioning of land for aerodromes, distribution of oil, etc., location of police posts and collection of war fund, and their agitation has had an unsettling effect." "A note on the progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942", *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W.

went up from 56,000 at the end of 1942 to 1,00,000 at the end of 1943, though it still fell far short of the quota of 2,00,000. All areas showed an increase, with new areas of influence being Kangra, Karnal, Rohtak, Gurgaon and Jhang. There was, however, no extension of influence to Muslim peasants, despite explicit instructions by the CPI national leadership.[77] A bye-election to the Punjab Legislative Assembly fought in February 1944 in Montgomery District was lost to the Akalis.[78]

In 1944, there was consistent activity by the Kisan Sabha and the membership increased to 1,36,811. Amritsar was in the lead with 33,500, followed by Ferozepore with 16,711 and Lahore with 14,145. The influence in the eastern districts was reported to have been consolidated. The Grow More Food Campaign was abandoned in the beginning of the year and emphasis was on voicing grievances of peasants over forcible collection of war funds, punitive police posts, sugar control orders, construction of canals and remodelling of outlets, distribution of essential commodities, and increase in land revenue. Many conferences were organized to voice these demands and were preceded by squad work to collect funds and do the necessary publicity.[79] The criticism of the government for forcibly collecting war loans and of the police became quite sharp and led to a number of arrests[80] including that of Bhagat Singh Bilga.[81] In September 1944, 1,500 kisan volunteers were recruited for the Provincial Punjab Kisan Conference at Jandiala in Jullundur District.[82] It almost seemed as if the curse of the People's War line was wearing off and people were beginning to again listen seriously to the Communists. But no, fate had still more curses in

[77] *Ibid*.

[78] FR(1) February 1944, *H.P.* F. 18/2/44.

[79] "A Note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944, to March, 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

[80] *Ibid*.

[81] Bhagat Singh Bilga, who was among the first group of eight major leaders to be released on 1 May 1942, was re-arrested in October 1944 for an allegedly objectionable speech he had made at a conference at Mandi Bahadurgarh in Ludhiana in June 1944. *The Tribune*, 15 October 1944. Bhagat Singh Bilga recounts that Sohan Singh Josh told him one week before his arrest that his speeches were not to the liking of the government, and that action would be taken against him. "And sure enough a week later I was picked up", says Bilga. He also recalled that "the links were very close at that time between the Government and the Party". In particular, he felt that Sohan Singh Josh, whom the Central party leadership was pushing as the leader in Punjab since he belonged to their group, went "too far" with the People's War line. Apart from his own example, which clearly showed Josh's close links with the government, he also cites the example of Wadhawa Ram, the peasant leader from Multan, who was asked by Josh to leave his room when he went there to tell him about some possible contacts in the army and the police. Bilga says that the cadre belonging to the Kirti group started getting re-arrested because they did not agree with the party line (interview).

[82] "A Note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April, 1944, to March, 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

store for the Communists; their cup of misery was not yet over. Now came the Muslim nationality line.

In brief, this formulation, which grew out of the very laudable desire to expedite Indian independence by promoting Hindu–Muslim unity, had been reached through a series of convoluted mental acrobatics that only Communists in certain phases were capable of. Hindu–Muslim unity had been translated as Congress–League unity, but this had to be given a theoretical basis for Communists could not stomach even the most patently opportunistic compromise without providing a theoretical basis for it. The theoretical basis was then given by making the Muslim League the legitimate representative of the Muslims of India. But the League wanted Pakistan—an independent nation. Therefore, religion came to be recognized as a basis for nationality—with a little stretching of Stalin's definition—and Muslims became a nation with a right to self-determination, and Pakistan became a legitimate demand of the Muslims.[83]

This theoretical position of support for Muslim nationality's demand for Pakistan had been there since 1942, but it did not impinge on practical politics in the province till Jinnah decided to formally subjugate the Unionist ministry to the Muslim League in March 1944 by repudiating the Sikandar–Jinnah Pact of 1937 (by which all Muslim members of the Unionist party simultaneously became Muslim League members, but the ministry in Punjab continued to be a Unionist ministry). He now wanted the ministry to be a League ministry. When the Unionists led by the new Premier Khizar Hayat Khan refused to toe Jinnah's line, he began attempts to topple the ministry, especially by involving the late Premier Sikandar's son, Shaukat Hayat Khan, in the attempt.[84] At this point, Sajjad Zaheer, a member of the Central Committee of the CPI, visiting the province in

[83] Interviews with Surjeet and Ranadive. Surjeet explains how the Party came to adopt the Muslim nationality line: "Muslim masses had gone behind the Muslim League, you are not able to rally them. Now the main hitch is, unless you are able to get Muslims with you, you cannot get independence.... So from that you come to some conclusion that... unless the Hindu–Muslim unity is forged, you cannot achieve independence.... Then, being Communist, you want to theorize it. So then you try to put it into the framework of a national question... then you theorize whether religion has been a contributory factor in the cultural development of certain communities.... So then you begin subjectively.... Once you are on that track, then you come to some subjective conclusion. Then you work on the basis of that. Then objective realities are relegated to the background and your subjective assessment comes to the fore." Also see Shri Prakash, "CPI and the Pakistan Movement", in Bipan Chandra, ed., *The Indian Left*: *Critical Appraisals,* New Delhi, 1983.

[84] Jinnah failed in this attempt to break the Unionist ministry. He then expelled Khizar Hayat Khan from the Muslim League and this was followed by all other Muslim members of the Unionist ministry resigning from the League. For the whole affair, see the letters from Glancy, Governor, Punjab, to Wavell, Viceroy, dated 6 April, 8 May, 23 May, 7 June, 24 June and 2 August 1944, *L/P & J/5/247*, IOR, London.

April 1944, discovered in this situation a conflict between pro-imperialist landlords and an anti-imperialist patriotic party of the Muslim people. The Communists were told to support defections from the Unionists to the League to bring down the Unionist ministry. The bait was that this would be replaced by a people's ministry supported by the League, Congress, Akalis and Communists. This was not all. He also "recommended that the Party should assist the League to enrol Muslims in large numbers in order to make it a mass organisation which would eventually pass out of the control of its present reactionary leaders. As a result of his report, instructions were issued to all District Committees to assist Divisional organizers of the League in the work of enrolment whether they asked for Communist assistance or not." In fact, quite a large number of Muslims were enrolled by the Communists in the League;[85] Even better, Muslim Communists, the few that were there, were told to join the League, so that they could "influence" it. "The understanding was that just as we have entered Congress and influenced it, similarly we could do that to the League. In any case, we thought, the League doesn't have much of an organisational structure in Punjab; we will influence it."[86] Mian Iftikhar-ud-din, despite his protestations that he had spent his entire life in the national movement—"Do not do this crime", he said—was sent to the League.[87] Danial Latifi, a most promising young comrade, became the office secretary of the Muslim League.[88] Ataullah Jahaniah, a prominent kisan leader, was sent to the League (and he never came back).[89] And these Communists even accepted the League's orders that they resign from the Communist Party before coming to the League. Nationalist Muslims were also asked by the Communists to join the League but they did not oblige.[90]

The result of all this was that the Communist position became quickly identified in the public mind as being pro-Pakistan and pro-Muslim League. This had a disastrous effect on their mass base among kisans—which was majority Sikh and very open to the on-going Akali appeals about the need

[85] The quote in the text is from: "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April, 1944, to March, 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W. Also see Sajjad Zaheer, *Light on League Unionist Conflict*, Bombay, July 1940.
Dr Adhikari was reported to have said that the foremost political task of the Punjab Party was to overthrow the Unionist ministry by uniting the Congress, the Muslim League and the Akalis into one progressive coalition. "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April, 1944, to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

[86] Interview with Karam Singh Mann.

[87] Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

[88] "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944, to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

[89] Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

[90] "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.; FR(2) June 1944, *H.P.* F. 18/6/44.

to beware of Muslim domination and Pakistan.[91] The Akalis were quick to take advantage of the situation and stepped up their attacks on the Communists, publicly calling them anti-nationalist and pro-Pakistan.[92] As Master Hari Singh said: "People's War line was also used against us, but what really made us notorious was the support to Pakistan—the Muslim nationality line".[93] H.S. Surjeet[94] and others concur in this understanding. Jagjit Singh Anand points out that Sohan Singh Josh lost the election in 1946 only because his opponent went around saying: "These are the people who are for Pakistan. They shout Pakistan Zindabad".[95] Dalip Singh Tapiala and Karam Singh Mann both acknowledge that the line was wrong.[96] Bhagat Singh Bilga was still understandably bitter: "I also opposed Adhikari's thesis on nationalities. I opposed the idea that Muslims are a nation—that is Pan-Islamism. Punjabis are a nationality, Pathans are a nationality, not Muslims. I opposed it openly, and was told to go home and do farming—which I went to do but the police put me in jail". (Bilga was re-arrested in 1944 because he went "too far" in his criticism of the government.)[97]

But if Muslims were a nation, what about the Sikhs? If religion was the basis of nationality, could it be denied to the Sikhs; moreover the Akalis were already vocal in their demand for "Azad Punjab" as a counter to the "Pakistan" demand. Propelled by the logic of their own theory, and also by the fear that the Sikh masses were reacting adversely to their support to Pakistan, and in order to build bridges with the Akalis, the Communists, instead of withdrawing from their erroneous position on Muslim nationality, tied themselves up in further knots by trying to reconcile the Sikh nation's right to self-determination with the idea of Pakistan. This led to a series of confused and confusing "theses" on the Sikh question.[98]

The first attempt was by Harkishen Singh Surjeet,[99] who, on his own admission, started this project as a reaction to the dismissal of his objections

[91] See, for example, FR(2) September 1944, *H.P.* F. 18/9/44, for the noise made by the Akalis when the Gandhi–Jinnah talks were going on.

[92] Communists were called unprincipled atheists, Russian agents, those who wanted to destroy religion and private property and support Pakistan, were financed by British government, and had embezzled foreign money. These charges were levied at the silver jubilee celebrations of the Jullundur District Akali Jatha at Jandiala between 25 and 27 November 1944. This was part of the massive anti-Communist campaign being carried on by Akalis at that time. FR(2) September, FR(2) November, FR(1) December 1944, *H.P.* 18/9/44, 18/11/44, 18/12/44.

[93] Interview.

[94] Interview.

[95] Interview.

[96] Interviews.

[97] Interview.

[98] "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944, to March, 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.; FR(1) and (2) February 1944, *H.P.* F. 18/2/44.

[99] "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944, to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

to the idea of support to Pakistan and the notion of religion being a contributory factor to the development of a nation. He had sent a note from jail where he was lodged at that time and in return he was sent a 30-page note by Sajjad Zaheer. He did not have the maturity to argue back, he says; therefore he acquiesced and began working on the idea that if this was so for Muslims, then the Sikhs also were a separate nation.[100] According to an official report, Surjeet suggested support to the Nagoke group (the pro-nationalist group) of Akalis and the sending of party members into the Akali party to overthrow the reactionary leaders.[101]

Another suggestion on the Sikh problem came from Sajjad Zaheer who recommended isolation of the Nagoke group as Fifth Columnists and an approach being made to honest Akali-Congressmen, whoever they were. This was ignored, "for the next move was that Sohan Singh Josh drafted a Khalistan scheme which, together with a demand for the release of Udham Singh Nagoke and other extremists, was used as a bait to attract the Akalis. Giani Kartar Singh was mildly interested and had an interview with Sohan Singh Josh and Teja Singh Swatantar. Nothing came of this as they could not agree over the Pakistan issue.... The Khalistan scheme was also subsequently rejected by the Central Committee of the CPI".[102] This was followed by a series of manoeuvres, too petty and too confusing to be documented.[103] "The final attempt at drafting a Sikh policy was made by Adhikari who somewhat belatedly came to the conclusion that the Communists had little hope of winning Sikh support for their policy as long as they were committed to uncompromising support of Pakistan leaving the Sikhs to make what terms they could with the Muslims.... To safeguard Sikh rights in Pakistan, he suggested three alternative plans", all equally impractical.[104]

No publicity was given to these plans, fortunately, and references to Pakistan were banned in rural areas owing to the resentment caused among Sikh audiences. Attention was then turned to fighting gurdwara elections and forming a front to do so from which Akalis were excluded. Thus, after spending about a year trying to evolve a satisfactory policy towards the Akalis, the Communists were back where they began—opposing the Akalis in the field. In the intervening period, however, "the rank and file had no clear cut policy to follow and at times the Central Committee of the CPI

[100] Interview.
[101] "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944, to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.
[102] *Ibid*.
[103] These included Teja Singh Swatantar and Sohan Singh Josh trying to pose as "Sikh" representatives and sending messages on behalf of "Sikhs" to Gandhiji and Jinnah during their talks, supporting a Congress-League agreement and organizing a Sikh unity week and "Sikh" meetings. They also included attempts to line up with the Nagoke group, which were foiled by Master Tara Singh's return to politics after his brief self-imposed exile. *Ibid*.
[104] *Ibid*. Jagjit Singh Anand in his interview gives details of these plans.

and the Provincial Organising Committee were at variance in their propaganda, and at others while one set of workers was promising co-operation with the Akalis, their comrades in the same district would be working against them".[105]

If the "People's War" line had meant that the cadre were working with their hands tied behind their backs, the "vacillation on the nationality question", as H.S. Surjeet characterized the confusion over the Muslim and Sikh nationality business,[106] tied up their feet as well and whatever success they achieved was remarkable considering they achieved it by crawling on their bellies. Generally speaking, the Kirti group raised strong objections to the nationality formulation and this further accentuated differences between the Kirti and Communist groups and seriously affected the functioning of the party in the province, leading to repeated interventions by the party headquarters, each one as unsatisfactory as the other. (In fact, it was the resentment over the People's War line and the nationality question, both of which were seen by Kirtis as impositions of the CPI, that finally led to the break in 1947 and the formation of the Lal Party by the Kirtis led by Teja Singh Swatantar.)[107]

Summing up his assessment of the peasant movement in this phase, Chain Singh Chain, a grass roots organizer of Jullundur District, says: "There was no real movement in this period. Meetings, etc., were there, but that was all. People didn't understand why we were talking of People's War. Uptil now we were so anxious to throw out the British, and now suddenly we want to support them. They began to have doubts, which increased with the pro-Pakistan line and later with the slogan of 'this independence is false'".[108] It is fashionable among some to defend the People's War phase by pointing to the high membership figures as proof of the line having no negative effect. Chain Singh Chain demurs: "Our membership may even have increased, but that was because workers were free to go about now and people were not afraid to enlist but it also meant that a lot of people enrolled casually, not like earlier, in the Imperialist War phase, when our strength was solid. The strength in the People's War phase was not a real strength. There was something missing".[109] Karam Singh Mann, too, points

[105] "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.; also FR(1) January, FR(1) March, FR(2), April 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/1/45, 18/3/45, 18/4/45.

[106] Interview.

[107] See interviews with Bhagat Singh Bilga, Joginder Singh Chhina, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Dalip Singh Tapiala. For Kirti–Communist differences and the attempts made to resolve them, see "A note on the progress made by the Punjab Communist Party since May 1942", *H.P.* F. 7/5/44 and K.W., and "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

[108] Interview.

[109] Interview.

out that "the hard core remained with us, but our influence was not much. We could collect food for the Bengal famine, etc., because of the strong Punjabi tradition of Guru Govind Singh, *dego teg fateh*, which means, 'the Khalsa's vessel will always be full', and not because of our influence over people. Just as in this country you can collect 20 to 25 thousand people on any pretext, though you couldn't do this in England or Russia, similarly you can collect foodgrains (in Punjab)—it is our tradition. The hard core remained, but not enthusiastic. Every section of our movement suffered.... And we were not really convinced about our line. At least I wasn't. There just wasn't that kind of conviction as we had earlier. We were always anti-British. To change was not easy".[110] Jagbir Singh Chhina echoes the same: "Among the committed workers, it (the Party) did retain its base. But it cannot be denied that it lost among the ordinary people. If you support the government, you are bound to lose. In the 1946 elections, Communists did not get what they expected—it was the result of this line".[111] Sohan Singh Narangabadi points out that the reason they got the response they did from the peasants during this period was "because we were the ones who had begun political work in the villages, whether on behalf of Communists or Congress. The response we got was not the same as in 1938 or 1939 or 1940, when we would collect 15,000–20,000 people. Now only 4,000–5,000 would come. People didn't like the People's War line. We had taken the tempo of the people so high on anti-war that it could not be now brought down. The response we got was simply because of the personalities and sacrifices of the leaders".[112]

Harkishen Singh Surjeet, in his assessment of this phase, points to another way of seeing the negative impact of the People's War line and the line on the nationality question. He considers these as the two mistakes which prevented the Communists from being in the first row in Punjab. "If these two mistakes were not there, I do not think anybody could have beaten us in Punjab, we could have been the single biggest force in Punjab". Dalip Singh Tapiala, too, accepts that had "the slogan of People's War not intervened, the kisan movement would have advanced further".[113] One might add to this list of "ifs" by pointing out that the People's War slogan meant missing out on the best opportunity for growth that the peasant movement (and the left) had been provided with since it had begun to stand on its feet: the Quit India Movement. It would have been one thing to follow a "wrong" line during a period of stability, but the historical cost of missing out on the phenomenal opportunity presented by a mass upsurge—when growth takes place in leaps and bounds and not incrementally—was

[110] Interview.
[111] Interview.
[112] Interview.
[113] Interviews.

incalculable. The Congress Socialists grew from a small group into a major force within the Congress because of their role in 1942. The Communists and the Kisan Movement they led had a far greater capacity to participate and grow in the course of the Quit India Movement—and certainly in Punjab they were the only ones, with the non-Communist Congress Socialists being very few.

As the end of the Second World War approached, it was not a very healthy and vigorous Kisan Movement that braced itself to face the fresh challenges.[114] It was like an army with all the best equipment and superb organization, with shining uniforms, but with something lacking in the spirit. It was to spend all its time in the next couple of years trying to recover the ground it had lost by straying from the straight path.

Anticipating Freedom: Post-War Phase, 1945–47

The post-war phase technically began in August 1945 but in practical terms it began much earlier when the government relaxed the restrictions on political activity and released many Congress workers towards the end of 1944. The Congress organizations were still under a ban, but Congressmen were able to meet under the banner of the Punjab Congress Workers' Assembly at Ludhiana on 16 and 17 December 1944. This was a very successful meeting with 400 provincial activists present and marked the beginning of the Congress revival in this new phase. By January, Congress Workers' Assemblies had been formed in most districts.[115] The Congress also soon announced its plan of setting up its own kisan sabhas (as well as labour and student organizations). This was inevitable, for as more and more Congressmen came out of jail, the resentment that had been generated against the Communists because of their violation of party discipline in the Quit India Movement came to the fore, and the desire to demarcate themselves from the Communists was very strong. The threat of expulsion from the Congress and the formation of rival front organizations began to loom large for the Communists.[116]

The Communists tried their best to wipe out the taint of 1942. They prepared to vigorously participate in the Independence Day celebrations on 26 January 1945, but the government put an end to these plans by

[114] However, among all the "fronts" of the Communist Party—women, labour, student, kisan—the kisan "front" had done the best. Others had declined considerably. "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

[115] "Note on Revival of Congress Activity in Punjab, 1944–45", dated 9 February 1945, *H.P.* F. 4/7/44, FR(1) January 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/1/45.

[116] "Note on Revival of Congress Activity in Punjab, 1944–45", dated 9 February 1945, *H.P.* F. 4/7/44; FR(2) February 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/2/45; "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

prohibiting meetings, etc.[117] Undaunted, the Communists tried their best to get into the Congress Workers' Councils being formed in the districts and were reported to have succeeded in some eight or nine districts, including Kangra, where all the office-bearers appeared to be Communists.[118] They attended the National Kisan Conference organized by the Congress in Gujjarwal Village in Ludhiana District in March and argued quite effectively with the Congress position.[119] In May, they even helped the Congress in the Assembly bye-elections from Rohtak and Lahore to convince Congressmen of their usefulness and commitment to Congress and the national movement.[120] In August, they succeeded, via Jawaharlal Nehru, who was on a visit to the province, to gain admittance as observers to the meeting of 2,000 Congress workers organized by Pratap Singh Kairon to facilitate the task of re-organization of the Punjab Congress. They even persuaded Nehru to come to their meeting, but failed to get any assurance from him that the Congress would adopt an attitude of leniency towards them.[121] They kept postponing the announcement of their plans for the 1946 elections till the Congress took a decision on their fate.[122] Finally, in October, the Punjab Congress took the decision to suspend 14 Communist members of the PCC from PCC membership and authorized district and Tehsil Congress Committees to take similar action against those of their office-bearers who had opposed the Quit India Movement. (It simultaneously suspended the Akalis and all those who had not participated in the individual Civil Disobedience Movement.)[123] The suspension was, however, from office and not from ordinary membership of the party. With this, a formal seal was placed on the split that had occurred in 1942 among the anti-imperialist forces which had been providing the leadership to the peasant movement.

While trying their best to avert the disciplinary action, the Communists had, in anticipation of the failure of their efforts, been working double time

[117] FR(2) January 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/1/45.

[118] Weekly summaries of Information to Honourable Members of Council, Serial No. 6, dated 6 February 1945, Intelligence Bureau, Home Department, Government of India, *H.P.* F. 51/10/45. They had failed to get admission to the Congress Workers' Assembly in Ludhiana in December, despite 400 of them, led by Adhikari, assembling in Ludhiana and carrying on the most vigorous propaganda to gain admittance. "A note on the Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

[119] FR(1) March 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/3/45. According to one report, this conference was a failure from the Congress point of view because of preliminary propaganda by and presence of large number of supporters of Communists. "A note on Punjab Communist Party and its allied bodies from April 1944 to March 1945", *H.P.* F. 7/1/45 and K.W.

[120] FR(2) May 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/5/45.

[121] FR(2) August 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/8/45.

[122] FR(1) September 1945, *H.P.* F. 16/10/45.

[123] FR(1) October 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/10/45.

to dig in into the rural areas of Central Punjab.[124] This was not easy, for they had to contend with strong Akali hostility as well as increasing Congress counter-mobilization.[125] Their confused interventions on the Sikh nationality question and their stand on Pakistan had sufficiently affected their base among Sikh peasants. Attempts to recover this base by participating in gurdwara elections and carrying on vigorous propaganda against Akalis did not seem to get them very far.[126] Continuing high prices of agricultural produce meant that the peasants were not inclined towards the usual modes of agitation around land revenue, *abiana,* etc.[127] Therefore, the Communists took up issues such as the shortage of cloth in the rural areas to express popular discontent.[128] They continued to organize conferences and meetings, especially in the Amritsar, Jullundur, Lyallpur and Montgomery districts.[129]

From August 1945, the movement for the release of the Indian National Army (INA) prisoners began to engage popular attention. The Congress was the first to take it up in a big way and there was a tremendous response, first in the towns and then in the rural areas as the INA soldiers returned home.[130] The Muslim League and the Akalis also extended support to the INA soldiers' cause, though in their own sectarian fashion, by campaigning for the release of Muslim and Sikh soldiers respectively.[131] The Communists,

[124] FR(1) February, FR(1) June, FR(1) July, FR(2) July, FR(2) September 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/2/45, 18/6/45, 18/7/45 and 18/9/45; *The Tribune*, 14 December 1944, 2 March, 30 May, 5, 11 and 20 September 1945.

[125] FR(1) and (2) March 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/3/45. Master Tara Singh had issued an appeal in December 1944 for Rs 2.5 lakh for missionary activities which included countering the wave of atheism among Sikhs that was spreading as a result of Communist influence. *The Tribune*, 27 December 1944.

[126] FR(2) April and FR(1) June 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/4/45 and 18/6/45.

[127] FR(2) March 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/3/45.

[128] FR(2) July, FR(1) August 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/7/45 and 18/8/45; *The Tribune*, 30 May, 5 and 20 September 1945.

[129] FR(1) June, FR(1) and (2) July, FR(2) September 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/6/45, 18/7/45 and 18/9/45. 2 March, 30 May, 5, 11 and 20 September 1945.

[130] See, for example, FR(2) August, FR(2) September, FR(1) and (2) October, FR(1) and (2) November, FR(1) and (2) December 1945, FR(1) and (2) February, FR(1) and (2) March 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/8/45, 18/9/45, 18/10/45, 18/11/45, 18/12/45, 18/2/46, and 18/3/46. From all accounts, INA heroes returning home were welcomed by crowds whose size and enthusiasm was unparalleled. When Shah Nawaz, Dhillon and Sahgal, the three big heroes of the INA reached Lahore in early January, the correspondent of *The Tribune* wrote that he has "no words to describe adequately and fully the scenes that he, along with over a lakh of people, witnessed at the Lahore railway station.... The least that one can say is that Lahore has never seen ever before such crowds, bubbling with enthusiasm." *The Tribune*, 6 January 1946. The train and car by which they travelled were repeatedly stopped by milling crowds and *deepmalas* were lit in their honour. *The Tribune*, 6, 7, 9 and 11 January 1946. Also see interviews with Karam Singh Mann, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri and Jagjit Singh Anand.

[131] See, for example, FR(1) September, FR(2) October 1945, FR(2) February 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/9/45, 18/10/45 and 18/2/46.

however, because of their serious reservations about the INA's role during the War, hesitated far too long and when they finally decided to join everyone else (when the rural areas began to respond in a big way), it was too late and their half-hearted efforts only led to more ridicule and hostility.[132] They thus missed out on one of the major possibilities of recovering their strength in the post-war phase.

The communal situation had been deteriorating rather rapidly in the province, with Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs getting increasingly polarized around their respective communal positions. Sikhs were particularly vocal about the demand for an independent state since they feared being abandoned to a Muslim Pakistan.[133] The rapid communalization of the Sikhs is shown by the tremendous response to the All-India Akali Conference held at Gujranwala from 29 September to 1 October 1945. This conference was attended by 80,000 people. Every political group which had Sikh support, except the Communists, was invited to this conference.[134] The Punjab Kisan Sabha could only gather between 3,000–8,000 people at its annual conference held at Jia Bagga in Lahore District on 29 and 30 September 1945.[135] Akali propaganda was mentioned as one of the reasons for this poor response—poor even in comparison to the war years.[136] Nor had the line of support to Pakistan gained them any following among Muslim peasants.[137] It had not even made the Muslim League better disposed towards them—their overtures for an alliance for the coming elections were rebuffed by the League.[138]

From September 1945, the election campaign began to occupy all the attention and energies of the various political groups and parties. The Communists, having finally given up hopes of remaining within the Congress, put up 24 candidates, of which 17 were from Sikh rural constituencies, three from Labour, one from a women's (Sikh) constituency, and three from general constituencies. They did not put up any candidate from the Muslim constituencies. A consistent campaign was carried on, but they were just

[132] See, for example, FR(1) December 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/12/45. In February 1946, the Communist offer of a joint demonstration in support of the mutiny in the Royal Indian Navy was turned down by the Congress and the Muslim League. FR(2) February 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/2/46. Karam Singh Mann also testified that the anti-Bose sentiments among the Communists led to a lack of genuine enthusiasm for the INA prisoners' release movement and prevented them from rising to the occasion and taking advantage of the opportunity. He contrasts the Communist behaviour with that of Nehru who, despite his differences with Subhas Bose, took up the INA cause and was able to emerge as the leader of the movement (interview).

[133] See, for example, FR(1) March 1946, *H.P.* F. 13/3/46.

[134] FR(1) October 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/10/45.

[135] FR(1) October 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/10/45; and *The Tribune*, 1 October 1945.

[136] FR(1) October 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/10/45. Also see FR(1) December 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/12/45.

[137] FR(1) September 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/9/45.

[138] FR(2) November 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/11/45.

not on the right side of any of the issues that dominated the election campaign. The Congress appeal was based on the sacrifices of 1942 and on the strong anti-British feeling generated by the INA movement. The Akalis were combining communal mobilization with support to the Sikh INA undertrials. The Muslim League was primarily concentrating on the "Islam in Danger" and "Pakistan" theme, along with support to the Muslim personnel of the INA. The Communists could neither talk of 1942, nor of the INA, nor about Pakistan or Azad Punjab. Their opponents were primarily the Congress and the Akalis and while it suited the former to remind the people of the Communist role in the Quit India Movement, the latter could happily harp on the communist support to the Pakistan demand.[139]

The result was a complete rout for the Communists—they lost everywhere.[140] Teja Singh Swatantar, who had been elected unopposed in 1937 from inside jail, lost his deposit.[141] Sohan Singh Josh, who had defeated the biggest landlord of the area in 1937, lost to a "right-wing Akali scoundrel (who) went around saying 'these people are for Pakistan. They shout Pakistan Zindabad'".[142] The general consensus seems to be that the 1946 elections were lost because of the unpopular policies based on the Peoples' War and Muslim nationality lines of the Communist Party.[143] The hesitation on the INA prisoners' release agitation also contributed to the debacle.[144] Also, this was the first time the Communists were going it alone. In 1937, it had been the combined strength of the anti-imperialist forces on which they had won their seats. After all, it was Dr Satyapal and other Congressmen who had proposed Teja Singh Swatantar's name for election in 1937 when he was in jail.[145] Isolation from the anti-imperialist mainstream had cost the Communists dearly indeed.

The election results had ended Unionist dominance in the legislature—they got only 20 seats. The Muslim League gained the maximum: it won 75 seats. The Congress got 51, an increase of 18 over 1937. The Panthic Sikhs

[139] FRs from September 1945 to February 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/9/45 to 18/2/46; "General appreciation of the results of elections to the Punjab Legislative Assembly, 1946", by the Election Commissioner, Punjab. *L/P&J*/8/472; Kripal C. Yadav, *Elections in Punjab* pp.106–22; *The Tribune* from September 1945 to February 1946; letters from the B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab to the Viceroy, from September 1945 to February 1946, *L/P&J*/5/248 and *L/P&J*/5/249.

[140] FR(2) February 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/2/46; "General appreciation of the results of elections", Election Commissioner, Punjab, *L/P&J/8/472*.

[141] Interview with Dalip Singh Tapiala.

[142] Interview with Jagjit Singh Anand.

[143] See, for example, interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina, Joginder Singh Chhina, Dalip Singh Tapiala and Jagjit Singh Anand.

[144] Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet. Also see FR(1) December 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/12/45.

[145] This point was particularly emphasized by Dalip Singh Tapiala in his interview. Also see interview with Master Hari Singh; and FR(1) October 1945, *H.P.* F. 18/10/45.

(Akalis) got 23.[146] A Congress–Akali-Unionist coalition ministry took office with Khizar Hayat Khan continuing as Premier.[147] But the Muslim League was in no mood to take its distance from power lying down and Muslim Unionists became special targets of attack as they were seen as the main barriers to power.[148] At the popular level also, communal mobilization was getting stronger day by day and the League's anger at being so close to and yet not in power only added to the intensity of their virulence in the province.[149]

The defeat in the 1946 elections had demoralized the Communist activists, including those working among the peasants. "With the purpose of driving out the memory of this defeat from the hearts and minds of the people",[150] and in keeping with the latest CPI line of "Final Assault",[151] the Kisan Sabha decided to launch a Kisan Morcha in Amritsar District, which came to be known as the Harsa Chhina Morcha after the name of the village—Harsa Chhina—that became its nerve-centre. The issue was the remodelling of canal outlets—also known locally as "*Moghas*" and the movement is also, therefore, known as the Mogha Morcha—on the Upper Bari Doab Canal. (We may recall that an agitation on the issue of re-modelling of outlets had emerged earlier as well, in mid-1938, in the Lyallpur and Amritsar districts. See the second section of Chapter 5, this volume). The Canal Department argued that the remodelling was necessitated by the need to supply more water to some villages at the tail of the distributary, but this did not cut much ice with the villages at the head of the distributary whose water supply was being reduced.[152] Some of the affected villages

[146] FR (2) February 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/2/46; "General appreciation of the results of the elections", Election Commissioner, Punjab, *L/P&J*/8/472; letter from B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 28 February 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249.

[147] For the various negotiations and discussions leading to the formation of the ministry, see letter from B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 28 February and 15 March 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249; and Confidential Note on the "Formation of a Ministry" by B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab, to Viceroy, dated 7 March 1946, *L/P&J*/8/472.

[148] See, for example, FR(1) and (2) March 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/3/46.

[149] See, for example, letter from B.J. Glancy, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 15 April, 2 and 15 May 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249; and FRs from March to December 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/3/46 to 18/12/46.

[150] Interview with Joginder Singh Chhina. Also see FR(2) February 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/2/46, for a similar perception by the government, and *The Tribune*, 27 July 1946, for an identical assessment by Congress and Akali leaders.

[151] Interview with Harkishen Singh Surjeet. In the words of the official report, there was "an increasing tendency towards mass action to redress real or imagined grievances". It also observed that the agitations launched in this phase were "symptoms of the growing contempt for authority, and of the desire of the left-wing politicians to take the fullest possible advantage of it". FR(1) August 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/8/46.

[152] Explaining the origins of the agitation, the governor wrote: "It is always difficult to distribute water evenly from the head to the tail of a distributary, and the Irrigation Department have to watch their results very carefully and to remodel the outlets if distribution is unfair. The

were in the Ajnala Tehsil of Amritsar District, the three Chhina villages being among them. They were the Communist strongholds—with Achhar Singh Chhina, the Kirti leader, hailing from the main village, Harsa Chhina.[153]

At the initiative of the Communists, a meeting was called sometime in June 1946 on behalf of the affected villages to which representatives of the major concerned political parties—Akalis, Congress and Communists—were invited.[154] The discussions culminated in the setting up of a Upper Bari Doab Amritsar Circle Canal Committee on which all parties were represented. Gurdial Singh Dhillon, a young nationalist Akali, who later became speaker of the Lok Sabha in Independent India, was appointed its general secretary. The executive committee of this body then issued an ultimatum to the government that, if the issue was not resolved to their satisfaction by 15 July 1946, they would launch a movement to resist the remodelling of the outlets.[155] This was followed by negotiations with the government, which, it may be recalled, was at the time being run by the Akali-Congress-Unionist coalition ministry and was therefore open to pressure by Akali and Congress leaders who were involved in the agitation. On 15 July, however, despite appeals by senior Congressmen such as Gopi Chand Bhargava to extend the ultimatum as they were negotiating a settlement with the authorities, the executive committee decided to go ahead and launch the Morcha.[156]

On the afternoon of 16 July 1946, Achhar Singh Chhina led a *jatha* of 15 members from Harsa Chhina village. On his shoulders he carried an iron *mogha* or outlet. The declared aim was to remove one of the existing outlets placed by the Canal Department and substitute it with the bigger outlet carried by the *jatha*. The *jatha*, whose members carried their respective party flags, proceeded towards the canal distributary, followed by a big crowd.

Upper Bari Doab Canal was constructed in 1865, and the distribution of water from it was in many respects less scientific than that from other canals. A large re-modelling scheme has been in progress for some time, having been started by the late Sir Chhotu Ram. Some truculent villages at the head of the distributary whose outlets were to be reduced in order to give a fair supply to the villages at the tail, decided that the scheme must be stopped". Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 31 July 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249. Also see Interviews with Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Dalip Singh Jauhal, Jagbir Singh Chhina, etc.

[153] *The Tribune*, 17 July 1946; interviews with Joginder Singh Chhina, Jagbir Singh Chhina, and Gurdial Singh Dhillon; and Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, p. 320.

[154] Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina and Sohan Singh Narangabadi. The meeting was reportedly held at the Harsa Chhina bridge, made famous by the *jathas* who used to march across it every day only to get beaten with police *lathis* and trampled upon by horses in the legendary *Guru de Bagh da Morcha* fought during the Akali Movement of the 1920s. Interview with Jagbir Singh Chhina.

[155] *The Tribune*, 15 July 1946; Interview with Gurdial Singh Dhillon and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

[156] *The Tribune*, 15 and 17 July 1946.

Before they could reach the canal, the police stepped in, arrested them and whisked them away to Amritsar.[157] This pattern was repeated on subsequent days as well.[158] In addition to this form of resistance, the residents of nine villages of the area also refused to take canal water as a mark of protest.[159]

Meanwhile, however, efforts to bring about a settlement had continued unabated. On 16 July itself it was reported that under instructions from Sardar Baldev Singh, Minister for Development and Bhim Sen Sachar, Minister for Finance and Industry, a delegation consisting of Ishar Singh Majhail, the MLA representing the affected area, Sant Ram Seth, another MLA and two members of the Canal Committee, had gone to Harsa Chhina to try and bring about a resolution of the problem and avert the agitation.[160] Three days later, there was a report of another attempt at a solution by Congress and Akali MLAs,[161] followed the next day by a statement by the Congress Assembly Party indicating that a settlement was in the offing.[162] On 22 July, less than a week after the beginning of the Morcha, it seemed that the efforts of the mediators had finally succeeded. A deputation which included the president and secretary of the Strike Committee that was conducting the Morcha met Sardar Baldev Singh, an agreement was reached and an official communique drafted in their presence. This communique, which was then issued to the press announced the appointment of an enquiry committee to go into the whole issue, promised the release of those arrested and hoped the *jathas* would be discontinued. The government now waited for the leaders of the agitation to honour their part of the agreement and suspend the Morcha.[163]

But that was not to be. Clearly under pressure from the Communist leadership at whose initiative and under whose control the movement was being conducted, the agreement was flouted and the *jathas* continued to march.[164] Presumably secure in their faith that relentless militancy was the

[157] *The Tribune*, 17 July 1946; and interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina and Sohan Singh Narangabadi.

[158] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 19, 20, 21, 22, 23, 24, 25, 26, 27 and 28 July 1, 3, 4, 9, 11, 12, 14 and 15 August 1946. Women's *jathas* also offered arrest. For example, on 24 July, 51 women led by Bibi Raghbir Kaur courted arrest. *The Tribune*, 25 July 1946. Also see interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, etc. One *jatha* was also arrested in Lahore while demonstrating in front of the Assembly. *The Tribune*, 22 July 1946.

[159] *The Tribune*, 21 July 1946.

[160] *The Tribune*, 17 July 1946.

[161] *The Tribune*, 20 July 1946.

[162] *The Tribune*, 22 July 1946.

[163] *The Tribune*, 23, 25, 27 and 28 July 1946, letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 31 July 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249.

[164] According to Jagbir Singh Chhina, a nephew of Achhar Singh Chhina and one of the prominent Communist activists in this movement, "the agreement got stuck on a small issue". The Communists insisted that the Government first release the agitators, change the outlets,

surest way to revolutionary deliverance and "negotiated settlement" a sure sign of bourgeois deviations, they continued to scuttle all possibilities of a successful conclusion to the Morcha.

In fact, what is remarkable about this Morcha is the sheer number of the opportunities that were continuously presented and consistently rejected. Immediately after the reneging on the agreement, another appeal made by Congress and Akali MLAs to call off the Morcha in view of the government's offer to review the remodelling scheme was rejected.[165] This was followed by another opening provided by Sardar Pratap Singh Kairon, a senior Congress leader and member of the Congress Working Committee, who tried to intervene in the issue.[166] Colonel Niranjan Singh Gill, hero of the INA, and now president of the Sikh Panthic Board and dictator of the Council of Action, offered another opportunity by appealing to both sides to relent.[167] A few days later, on 2 August, the Revenue Minister, Sir Muzaffar Ali Khan Qazilbash, appealed to the peasants to stop the *morcha* and promised to restore the old *moghas* if the Enquiry Committee appointed by the government recommended it.[168] A day later, the government named all the 14 members of the Enquiry Committee and announced that it would begin its sittings on 13 August in Amritsar.[169] The Committee members included political leaders like Pratap Singh Kairon and Udham Singh Nagoke who could be expected to take a stand sympathetic to the peasants.[170] Further, the Working Committee of the Punjab Provincial Congress Committee appointed a special committee to try and bring about a settlement.[171] But, untempted by opportunities for a settlement, unmoved by appeals and unaffected by criticism, trapped in the inexorable logic of their own theoretical constructions, the Communists continued to deliver their daily minimum quota of 15 arrests.

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and then the *jathas* would stop. The government, on the other hand, wanted the Morcha withdrawn before it released the prisoners and changed the outlets (interview). From the newspaper accounts and government sources, however, it seems clear that even this was an afterthought or a pretext to refuse to call off the movement. Earlier, in the meeting with Sardar Baldev Singh, an agreement had been reached and it was on that basis that the government made its announcement.

165 *The Tribune*, 24 July 1946.

166 *The Tribune*, 28 July 1946.

167 *The Tribune*, 29 July 1946.

168 *The Tribune*, 3 August 1946.

169 *The Tribune*, 4 August 1946.

170 *The Tribune*, 8 August 1946. When the Enquiry Committee commenced its sittings in Amritsar on 13 August, a big crowd forced its way into the compound, shouted slogans, etc. On the 14 August, the crowd remained quiet, and representatives went and submitted a memorandum requesting status quo till Committee gave its report. *The Tribune*,14 and 15 August 1946.

171 *The Tribune*, 11 August 1946.

By mid-August, when the saga of daily arrests had gone on for a month and around 500 persons were already in jail,[172] when it was clear that the leaders of the Morcha had no intention of arriving at a settlement and when everyone had tired of making appeals, the government changed track and stopped arresting the *jathas*. As a result, for 10 days, the *jathas* marched undeterred to the canal and demolished 10 of the offending *moghas*.[173] But the lack of arrests, it appears, contributed to a waning of popular enthusiasm.[174] In order to whip up enthusiasm, it was then decided that no more *moghas* were to be demolished and the *jathas* would now go to the Canal Department premises in Amritsar city.[175] The expectation obviously was that demonstrations in the city would attract greater publicity and thus make it difficult for the government to continue its present policy of ignoring the agitation.

In accordance with this plan, on 26 August, two *jathas* of 20 each, one of men and the other of women, accompanied by a crowd, reached the Canal offices, they then proceeded to throw stones and forcibly try to enter the office building—thereby provoking the police to make a *lathi*-charge.[176] This tactic was possibly designed by a leadership desparate to revive the flagging support by provoking repression in the hope of arousing sympathy. In the event, however, even the brutal *lathi*-charge, in which women also were injured,[177] failed to have the expected effect. Clearly, the usually sympathetic sections of political opinion among the Congress and the Akalis had lost patience with a movement they had tried their best to bring to a honourable conclusion.[178] Besides, the size of canal outlets in Ajnala Tahsil could hardly be expected to compete successfully for political attention with the larger questions of elections to the Constituent Assembly, the formation of the interim government at the centre, the survival of the coalition ministry in the province, and the rising tide of communalism.[179]

Nevertheless, oblivious of their own irrelevance and of the cause they were doggedly flogging, the Communist leaders continued on their chosen path. To make up for declining local support and to demonstrate their influence in other areas, *jathas* of activists were now called in from other

[172] FR(1) August 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/8/46.

[173] *The Tribune*, 17, 22, 23, 24 and 25 August 1946; FR(2) August 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/8/46.

[174] Interview with Sohan Singh Narangabadi. Jagbir Singh Chhina and Sohan Singh Narangabadi also allege that stopping of arrests was combined with physical threats and this, too, scared away the people. (interviews).

[175] The new programme of action was announced by the Mogha Strike Committee at a big conference held at Harsa Chhina on 25 August. *The Tribune*, 26 August 1946. Also see interviews with Sohan Singh Narangabadi and Jagbir Singh Chhina.

[176] *The Tribune*, 27 August 1946; FR(2) August 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/8/46.

[177] *The Tribune*, 27 August 1946.

[178] This is evident from the fact that the usual condemnation of police excesses through press statements or public meetings was totally absent.

[179] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 19 and 20 July 1946; FR(1) and (2) August 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/8/46.

parts of Amritsar District, as well as from other districts such as Jullundur, Ferozepore, Montgomery, Sheikhupura and from Kapurthala State.[180] Most of the time, these *jathas* were intercepted on the way to the Canal office and their members arrested, thus preventing any recurrence of publicity-generating events like *lathi*-charges, etc.[181] The leadership also tried to revive public interest by organizing kisan conferences in some major villages.[182] But by mid-September, two months after the *Morcha* began, it had clearly run out of steam and even Communist obduracy could keep it going no longer.[183] The *Morcha* was never withdrawn, it just fizzled out on its own. And despite assertions to the contrary in official party reports and histories,[184] there was not even the fig-leaf of a settlement, leave alone a "victory".[185] Peasants who had stoically watched their crops wither while their neighbours' fields turned green,[186] lost heart and meekly accepted the water flowing out of the outlets repaired in accordance with the remodelling scheme.[187] The Harsa Chhina *mogha* Morcha thus ended without

[180] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 23, 26 and 29 August, 3, 5, 7, 12 and 14 September 1946. Also see interviews with Joginder Singh Chhina, Jagbir Singh Chhina, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Dalip Singh Jauhal, Ruldu Khan and Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

[181] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 28 and 29 August, 3, 5, and 7 September 1946.

[182] See, for example, *The Tribune*, 2 and 3 September 1946.

[183] The last report of a *jatha* being arrested is dated 17 September 1946. *The Tribune*, 18 September 1946. The governor also noted on 14 September 1946 that "the Amritsar agitation about canal outlets looks like petering out". Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 14 September 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249. Jagbir Singh Chhina also confirms that the *Morcha* lasted for two months (interview).

[184] The claim of victory is made in the official report of the All-India Kisan Sabha which says that the government ultimately yielded and increased the water supply. Report for 1945–47 presented by general secretary of AIKS at its tenth session held at Sikandra Rao in U.P from 22–26 May 1947, published in *AIKS, Organisational Reportage, No. 1 of 1947–48, Sikandra Rao Decisions*. More recently, Master Hari Singh, in his book, which is virtually an official Communist history of the peasant movement in Punjab, has claimed that "the *morcha* continued till settlement was reached between irrigation minister and leaders of the movement to the effect that water allowance to the concerned villages would not be reduced. At this the *morcha* was called off and all the prisoners numbering over 1000 were released". Master Hari Singh, *The Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, p. 322.

[185] The local-level organizers of the movement, however, readily acknowledged that it was a failure. Jagbir Singh Chhina, for example, said: "No settlement took place. No concessions were made. The *morcha* failed. Concessions would have been made only if an agreement had been made; once the *morcha* failed, why should the Government give concessions?" (interview). Dalip Singh Tapiala, a prominent leader of the movement who stayed underground for five months in Harsa Chhina village, stated: "In that *morcha*, in reality we got nothing" (interview).

[186] Jagbir Singh Chhina said that one of the causes of the loss of morale of the peasants was that after the breakdown of the agreement the government succeeded in persuading some peasants in neighbouring villages to accept water from the new outlets (interview).

[187] A report in *The Tribune* of 11 October 1946 stated that "the Morcha has fizzled out and all the zamindars who had refused to take any canal water for the last harvest have resumed taking their quota with all the nine *moghas*, demolished by the kisan *jathas*, repaired in

restoring either the old *moghas* to the peasants or their old prestige to their leaders.[188]

One of the objectives of the Communists in launching a joint struggle with Akalis and Congress had presumably been to end the isolation into which they had painted themselves as a result of their various "lines" during the war years. But the manner in which they conducted the Morcha only heightened their isolation. In true sectarian fashion, they made no efforts to carry their allies; they ignored their advice, rejected their appeals and thus ensured that gradually even the most sympathetic among them moved to the side. Where they should have used their allies' strength to increase their own and that of the movement,[189] they tried to show up the "compromising tendencies" of their allies by emerging as the only ones who were willing to fight to the end.[190] Instead, the allies, who were hardly political novices, saw through the game and gradually withdrew their support from a movement that was heading nowhere.[191]

It was indeed tragic that a movement which had aroused considerable support among the peasants and in which they had made a great deal of sacrifice—which had a very significant participation of women, including among the roughly 1,000 persons that went to jail, for which many dedicated

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accordance with the re-modelling scheme." Jagbir Singh Chhina confirmed this: "So in this way, one following the other, in spite of our saying no, the moghas kept on being opened" (interview).

[188] Jagbir Singh Chhina held the rejection of the settlement with the government responsible for the debacle. To quote: "If we had not been so stubborn on this point, then the *moghas* would have been restored and our influence, our prestige, would also have been restored. But we made a mistake. We insisted that you first release the prisoners. What difference would it have made, though, even if they had stayed for four more days, since in any case they stayed in jail for six months?" (interview).

[189] Dalip Singh Tapiala, for example, said that one of the reasons for the inability of the movement to sustain itself was that it was being run only by the Communist Party. Other parties gave only half-hearted support (interview). It does not, however, occur to him that the Communists' own attitude had at least contributed to the half-heartedness of the others.

[190] To quote Jagbir Singh Chhina, "Before starting the struggle, we called all the parties. But once the struggle started, the Communist Party dominated. The other parties felt that their assistance would go waste, the Communists will get all the advantage. So bit by bit they started retreating" (interview).

[191] The first public criticism of the movement by Akali and Congress leaders was made after the Communists arbitrarily backed out of the agreement they had made with the government. *The Tribune*, 27 July 1946. After this, their withdrawal of support to the movement was made clear by repeated appeals for its withdrawal. The reneging on the agreement by the Communists had considerably embarassed the ministers and other mediators and after that they had no choice but to distance themselves from the Communists. This was particularly so because the agreement had been made against the advice of the governor, who made no secret either of his disapproval or of his subsequent smugness when it was not honoured by the Communists. See letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 31 July 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249.

grass-roots level organizers worked selflessly for weeks on end,[192] which was initiated with the support of powerful political allies who were willing to use their influence with the government in its favour—had so little to show in the credit column of its balance-sheet and for so little reason.

The post-script to the Morcha was even more embarrassing. The resistance having died out without any settlement emerging, the cadre remained trapped in jail[193]—even trials were not held. Outside, the political situation deteriorated so rapidly and, with Partition becoming a distinct possibility, a sense of panic gripped those inside the jails. Worried about their homes, their families, their villages, not knowing whether they would be in India or Pakistan, dead or alive, most of the activists, it appears, got out on bail after six months by standing surety for each other.[194] Gurdial Singh Dhillon was among the very few who, in deference to party (Congress) discipline, stayed till a *habeas corpus* petition drew a severe reprimand from the High Court about detention without trial and was released. This was around June 1947.[195]

The unnecessary nature of the tragedy invited by the leaders of the Harsa Chhina Morcha upon themselves and their followers is brought into sharp relief by the contrast presented by the victorious tenants' struggle led by the Congress Socialists in Hissar District that ran its course within the time span of the Harsa Chhina Morcha. The struggle was centred in the village of Chotala which, along with two neighbouring villages, Taju Khera and Babu Khera, was owned by 20 families of *malguzars* who cultivated their 45,000 bighas of land through 5,000 tenants.[196] The dispute between the *malguzars* and the *muzaras* or tenants on the issue of evictions[197] had been going on since 1943 and in October 1945, 130 tenants were arrested when under the leadership of Devi Dayal they protested against the landlords' violation of an agreement arrived at through the arbitration of the sub-divisional officer of Sirsa only a month earlier. The Congress had been

[192] Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina, Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Gurdial Singh Dhillon, Dalip Singh Jauhal, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, and Joginder Singh Chhina.

[193] It seems that Congress and Akali leaders continued to make efforts to secure the release of those arrested. *The Tribune*, 11 and 13 October 1946. It also appears that Sardar Baldev Singh, the Minister for Development, made efforts to secure their release, but the governor advised strongly against it. Baldev Singh's bargaining position in the matter was obviously not strong given the earlier behaviour of the leaders of the movement in rejecting the agreement he had personally negotiated. Letters from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 31 August and 14 September 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249.

[194] Interviews with Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Jagbir Singh Chhina and Gurdial Singh Dhillon.

[195] Interview with Gurdial Singh Dhillon.

[196] *The Tribune*, 7 and 23 August 1946.

[197] Even though they may not have been legally classified as occupancy tenants, the fact of their having been in continuous occupancy for the last 100 years (*The Tribune*, 23 August 1946) had obviously given them a strong claim to the land, at least in their own consciousness.

supporting the tenants' cause and the Working Committee of the Punjab Provincial Congress had passed resolutions in favour of the tenants in 1945 and 1946 and various Congress MLAs had been involved in the negotiations. Jawaharlal Nehru was reported to have taken a personal interest in the matter.[198]

A further attempt at evictions by landlords, followed by another abortive attempt at arbitration, this time by the deputy commissioner of Hissar District,[199] culminated in the arrest on 2nd August 1946 of 50 tenants led by Hem Raj, President of the Muzaras' Committee, and Comrade Om Prakash, a Congress Socialist worker.[200] More arrests of tenants and Congress Socialist activists followed in the next few days.[201] The Congress Socialists threatened to launch a satyagraha if the arrests did not step and the demands were not conceded. A satyagraha camp was set up at Dabwali, a small town in the vicinity, and *jathas* were asked to be sent from other parts of the province. Chaudhuri Sahib Ram, an MLA, declared on 14 August that he would personally lead a *jatha* of *satyagrahis* if the repression did not stop and the demands were not met within a week.[202]

Meanwhile, efforts at a settlement had already begun. The Working Committee of the Provincial Congress Committee had sent Chaudhuri Tarif Singh to Chotala to help settle the dispute.[203] Ministers and MLAs put pressure on the deputy commissioner via telephone calls from Simla, the summer capital.[204] Seth Sudershan, a prominent Congressmen and chief whip of the party in the Provincial Assembly, was also despatched to the scene.[205] And, by 22 August, he, along with Chaudhuri Bagh Ali, the Private Parliamentary Secretary to the Revenue Minister, Punjab, had hammered out an agreement between the landlords, the tenants and the district authorities.[206]

The agreement amounted to a clear victory for the tenants. Ejectments were to stop and land was to be restored to the original tenants, landlords were to receive only one-third of the produce as rent, *begar*, which included

[198] *The Tribune*, 7 August 1946. According to the governor, the tenants were being encouraged by some Congress leaders who had personal and political rivalry with some of the landlords. See letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 15 August 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249. While this may be true of some individuals, it does not explain the stand taken by the CSP, the Congress party and even Jawaharlal Nehru, all of whom could not be motivated by rivalry with the landowners of Chotala.

[199] Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 15 August 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249.

[200] *The Tribune*, 7 August 1946.

[201] *The Tribune*, 9 and 11 August 1946.

[202] *The Tribune*, 7, 15 and 20 August 1946.

[203] *The Tribune*, 10 August 1946.

[204] Letter from E.M. Jenkins, Governor, Punjab to Viceroy, dated 15 August 1946, *L/P&J*/5/249.

[205] *The Tribune*, 18 August 1946.

[206] *The Tribune*, 23 August 1946.

forced labour and free service, was to stop and all those arrested were to be released.[207] With far less effort than the Communists in Harsa Chhina, the Congress Socialists had succeeded in turning to their own and the tenants' advantage the favourable objective situation created by the coalition ministry being in power. They quickly accepted the settlement and set about celebrating it as a big victory by organizing large conferences to which national leaders were to be invited.[208] The Communists could have been celebrating a whole month earlier,[209] if only the tyranny of a newly-emerging moribund party line had not forced them to turn even victory into defeat.

The post-war phase also witnessed the general resurgence of tenant struggles—the Chotala tenants' struggle was part of a general wave of unrest and upsurge among tenants in the post-war phase. Some of these struggles occurred in new areas, others were revived after having been interrupted by the War. The biggest one was in Patiala, which we are looking at separately. In Nili Bar, Montgomery and Multan, where the movement had already advanced considerably in the year 1937–39, there was a fresh spurt in 1946–47. Tenants were refusing to pay anything more than the legal share of 50 per cent, no *abwabs*, no carrying the produce free of charge to the landlord's godown, etc. The demands were the same as earlier; more and more tenants were now lining up behind them and the targets were no longer primarily the lease-holding companies but also included the landlords. There was also an incident which involved the death of two tenants. Tenants had collected at Diluwala near Arifwala in Montgomery District on 1 January 1947 to meet the deputy commissioner who was coming for negotiations with representatives of the tenants and the landlords. Before the officer arrived, the police opened fire and killed two tenants. To cover up their action, the police then arrested a number of kisan workers who were still in jail when Partition came into force. According to the accounts of contemporaries, the movement in this area was expanding rather rapidly when Partition intervened and disrupted the process.[210]

A number of other tenant struggles erupted in pockets spread all over the province—in Una and Urmur in Hoshiarpur District, and in Ferozepore

[207] *Ibid*.

[208] *The Tribune*, 23 and 24 August and 18 September 1946.

[209] The agreement which was later rejected by Communists in the Harsa Chhina Morcha had been concluded on 22 July 1946, and the Chotala settlement came on 22 August 1946, exactly a month later.

[210] FR(1) November 1946, *H.P.* F. 18/11/46; Express letter No. 1084-ADSB from Chief Secretary, Punjab to Home Department, New Delhi, dated 7 February 1947, *H.P.* F. 22/6/47; General Secretary's Report for 1945–47 in AIKS Organisational Reportage; Chhajju Mal Vaid, "Tenant Movement", in Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, pp. 275–76, 285–87; Interviews with Master Hari Singh, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, Wadhawa Ram, Chain Singh Chain, and Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri.

District on the estates of the Nawab of Mamdot and the Sodhis. The Ferozepore struggle[211] was particularly interesting because it revealed some interesting aspects of peasant consciousness. The Sodhis were descendants of the brother of the sixth Guru of the Sikhs who had betrayed the Guru to the Mughals. They had been given the land of six or seven villages in return for that favour.[212] These villages were in the Ferozepore Tehsil of Ferozepore District, not far from the lands of the Nawab of Mamdot,[213] where the Kisan Sabha had established a base since 1944 by carrying on a struggle against evictions. The Nawab had been trying to get Muslim and Sikh tenants to fight among themselves by shifting Muslim tenants to the better lands. He also hoped in the process to prevent the establishment of any claims to particular pieces of land by both Muslim and Sikh tenants. The Kisan Sabha, led by a young Muslim, son of an agricultural labourer, Ruldu Khan, prevented these evictions by consistent propaganda and a volunteer force of village youth who went wherever evictions were threatened. However, despite being established in the Nawab's estate since 1944, the Kisan Sabha, till 1947, could only raise the issue of evictions, and never of reduction of the landlords' share of *batai*.

On the Sodhis' estate, however, the Kisan Sabha, starting work only in 1946, almost immediately gave the slogan of *"no-batai"*. The reason was that the tenants of the Sodhis had a consciousness that they were at one time the legitimate proprietors of the land and that the Sodhis had acquired their right through illegitimate means—by betraying the Guru. Though this was now a 200–300 year old story, it was still a living part of their consciousness. In other circumstances, the origins of the Sodhis' landownership would have disappeared into oblivion in these many years, but, given the nature of their past, it carried along in popular memory via the religious tradition. And if, as the religious tradition enjoined, the Sodhis' actions were illegitimate, then their rights to its rewards were also illegitimate. By implication, therefore, the legitimate right was that of the tenants whose forefathers had been dispossessed.

In the new circumstances created by the democratic political awakening, the availability of political organizations willing to take up their cause,

[211] The following account of the struggle in Ferozepore, unless specified otherwise, is based on the interview with Ruldu Khan, a major organizer of the struggle, who later became a prominent leader of the Punjab Agricultural Labourers' Union.

[212] Their holdings were to the tune of 4,500 acres. Chhajju Mal Vaid, "Tenant Movement", p. 271.

[213] The Nawab of Mamdot was the foremost leader of the Muslim League in Punjab. The Mamdot family owned the largest private landed estate in the province. They had been assigned the revenue of 229 villages. They owned private canals and sold water to other cultivators from these canals. They had also purchased 76 rectangles of land in Montgomery and 22 squares in Lyallpur, a total of 2,500 acres. *DG Ferozepore*, 1915, p. 238; Imran Ali, *The Punjab Under Imperialism*, Delhi, 1989, p. 83.

and when other tenants were engaging in struggles for their demands, as in Montgomery and Multan, the tenants of the Sodhis also got an opportunity to press forward a right that had probably been a part of their own and their forefathers' consciousness for generations. In the same circumstances, however, the Mamdot tenants could not even be persuaded to stir themselves to retain the land that they were cultivating at Partition when the Nawab left for Pakistan and his property was declared evacuee property and allotted to refugees from Pakistan. Most of the tenants were evicted by the new allottees.

The peasant struggles that emerged in the post-war years were situated in an entirely new political context. Independence had not yet come, but it was clear that it was coming very soon. The secretary of state's public statement on 1 January 1946, the sending of the Cabinet Mission in March 1946, the formation of the interim government, and the elections to the Constituent Assembly, were sufficient proof of British intentions to leave. The prospect of impending freedom from colonial bondage unleashed a new energy—which no longer needed to be directed against imperialism. It found expression instead in a new assertiveness in claiming greater rights and making more demands to secure a more advantageous position in the new political, social and economic structure that freedom was about to bring into being. In this sense, the peasant struggles of the post-war phase are to be seen not merely as continuations of the earlier struggles of the anti-imperialist epoch, but as transitional to or marking the beginnings of the new phase of peasant struggles that continued into the 1950s and was marked by an immediate concern with questions of land reform—abolition of *jagirdari* and *zamindari* rights, protective legislation for tenants and land ceiling legislation.

Indian Independence was accompanied, as we all know, by the scourge of Partition. Punjab suffered as much as it was possible to suffer when a single whole is rent into two. The peasants of Punjab were amongst the worst sufferers. Many had to leave hearth and home and try to start life anew. Others, who were luckier, and did not have to leave forever their ancestral lands and homes, were sucked into the madness of looting and killing. Among those who had been leading the peasants, and had some influence over them, only the Communists and Congressmen retained their sanity and tried to help the peasants retain theirs. The Muslim League and the Akalis went overboard themselves, and could only help to increase the intensity of the insanity.[214]

[214] The account in this and the next paragraph is based primarily on interviews with participants, especially Master Hari Singh, Chain Singh Chain, Ruldu Khan, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, Jagbir Singh Chhina, Joginder Singh Chhina, Jwala Singh Barapind, Dalip Singh Tapiala and Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

So overpowering was the wave of senselessness that even the most powerful of the leaders could, on their own admission, only persuade the villagers to refrain from killing—there was no way they could stop the looting.[215] Stories abound of heroic efforts by secular political activists, mostly Communist, often Congress as well,[216] to save encircled groups of Muslims, keep them in safe custody and escort them safely across what had become the new border. They were greatly helped in this by the womenfolk. Though it was more a symbolic effort, for most admit that at best they could influence their own villages and some others where their political presence was very strong, yet the symbolism was important.[217] For in times of darkness such as those that this subcontinent passed through in 1947, it is symbols like these that kept hope alive and promised a new beginning.

[215] This was particularly emphasized by Master Hari Singh and Harkishen Singh Surjeet in their interviews.

[216] Dalip Singh Tapiala and Jagbir Singh Chhina, both Communists, describe the work done by Congressmen, often along with Communists (interviews). Harkishen Singh Surjeet, however, asserts that only Communists remained secular in the moment of frenzy (interview).

[217] For example, interviews with Chain Singh Chain, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri and Master Hari Singh. In western Punjab, where their influence was much less and they could not play as active a role, they nevertheless tried to help Hindus and Sikhs by furnishing information and providing assistance in escaping from communal attacks.

Seven

Peasant Protest in a Non-Hegemonic State: The Princely State of Patiala, 1930–53

In this chapter, we turn our attention to the peasant movement in the largest princely or Indian state in Punjab—Patiala. The major reason for singling out Patiala for special attention from among the numerous Indian states in Punjab is that it was the locale for one of the most powerful and successful tenant struggles in the province. Besides, the peasant movement in Patiala had many links with its counterpart in British Punjab and in a sense, therefore, the story of the peasant movement in Punjab is really incomplete without the inclusion of its Patiala chapter. The Patiala story also enables us to take a peep into the immediate post-Independence years since, unlike the movement in the British areas which was rudely interrupted by Partition, the peasant movement in Patiala continued into the early 1950s when its basic demands were incorporated into the new land reform legislation. A comparative look at the peasant movements operating within the very divergent political and state structures of autocratic Patiala and semi-democratic British Punjab will also help in a delineation of the variables that influence the choice of modes and forms of protest.

The Political Context of Princely Patiala

Peasant movements in most of the Indian states had to encounter problems and operate in conditions quite different from those in British India, though the nature of the forces that brought them about was similar. The India of the princely states was economically integrated with the rest of the country but, since the princes were to serve as the bulwarks of the Empire, they were allowed a certain leverage in the maintenance of authoritarian control over their subjects. Civil liberties of the kind that existed in British India were largely absent, and so were any forms of representative

institutions.[1] This inevitably limited the scope of pressure that could be exerted on the authorities through more or less constitutional and legal means and pushed popular protest and resistance into forms different from those in neighbouring British districts.

The personal style of functioning of the rulers, and the concentration of authority in a single individual or at best a clique, made decision making either too protracted or too rough and ready and abrupt a process. Further, the administration in most of the states lacked the bureaucratic efficiency of the government in British India, allowing situations to reach a crisis point much more frequently than in the latter. Hence, there was all too frequent a resort to repression—a price that had to be paid for the inefficiency in accommodation and conciliation and early defusion of potentially explosive situations. The time-lag factor had its own implications—the British had been handling popular agitations at least since the first decade of the century; in the Punjab states at least, this awakening began to appear only in the 1920s and 1930s. It took a while for the autocratic set-ups to realize that pure repression, in the long-run, was counter-productive and that it must be combined with other, subtler means of containment.

The British were in a dilemma. They could neither afford to give all-out support to the repressive and authoritarian tendencies of the rulers, as this might threaten rebellion, nor could they push the princes too far, for their active support was crucial,[2] especially in the years when the air was thick with the talk of federation.

[1] This was not true of all the Indian states. Some of them had introduced varying forms of representative institutions, for example, Rajkot, Travancore, Cochin, Mysore, Baroda and Aundh. Some of them, such as Baroda, even acted as havens of refuge for people running away from British repression, as, for example, during the Bardoli struggle in 1928 and the Civil Disobedience Movement in 1930–31.

[2] This duality of the British position is very well expressed in the response of the Punjab government to the pressure brought to bear on it in 1930 by the Political Agent as well as the Patiala State to declare the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal an unlawful organization. The prime minister of Patiala urged action on the ground that "His Highness the Maharaja of Patiala and his government have to bear the brunt of the Praja Mandal attacks...because His Highness has always been a staunch ally of the British Government... and it is up to the suzerain power to protect the Ruling princes... *and thus prevent the extension of the Independence Movement into the Punjab States*" (emphasis added). Confidential note by Prime Minister, Patiala (undated, but internal evidence points to sometime soon after March 1930), *L/P&S/13/885*. The Political Agent in his turn reported that "the Punjab Princes have strong feelings of resentment on the subject and are anxiously waiting to see what steps may be taken by the Government..." Extract from PY 72/31, p. 12, *ibid*. The chief secretary, Punjab, seeking to explain the stand of his government to the Government of India, observed that while "ordinarily the policy of this Government has been to help the States and their rulers as far as we legitimately can... and in the past a good deal of assistance has been given...." and although "there is some ground for action against the Mandal... but if such action was taken, it appears to the Governor in Council that it is not unlikely to be construed as a deliberate step by the Government of India to stifle the airing and expression of grievances by state subjects in a recognized manner",

Besides, the Congress had by now, in practice at least, abandoned the policy of non-interference in the affairs of the princely states.[3] The general radicalization of the Congress that took place under the influence of Nehru and others with left-wing inclinations contributed to this shift.[4] Further, as independence became a more immediate possibility, the question of the states acquired a sense of urgency. In any case, the All-India States Peoples Conference (AISPC), established in 1927, had close links with the Indian National Congress and these links were now strengthened, the process culminating in the election of Jawaharlal Nehru as president of the AISPC session at Ludhiana in 1939.[5] The other most important groups, the Akalis, the Communists and the Socialists, had at no stage shared the Congress inhibitions about involvement in state politics.

The specific situation in Patiala was a product of all these diverse forces and tendencies. The people of the state, especially the Sikhs, had felt the politicizing influence of, and participated in, the Akali movement in its most radical phase in the early and mid-1920s, incurring the wrath of the Maharaja who was undivided in his loyalty to the British.[6] The anti-imperialist and

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especially as the proceedings of the Praja Mandal Conference held at Ludhiana in October 1930 show "that the Mandal considers the paramount power is the source from which relief may be expected". Nevertheless, he emphasized that the question must be decided on the basis of wider political considerations and that "*it is for the Government of India to decide how far*, in the circumstances, *the desire of the States*... should be met by action against the Mandal, and how far as a matter of general policy *it is desirable that this machinery*, by which apparently some quite reasonable or plausible grievances of state subjects are ventilated, *should be shut down*." Stressing again the wider policy implications of the matter, he concluded: "These considerations... are of wider import than those with which the Punjab Government are primarily concerned, and are matters to be weighed by the Government of India" (emphasis added). Letter from Boyd, Chief Secretary to the Government of India, Home Department, Simla, dated Lahore, October 23, 1930, enclosed with India Political Secretary's letter No. 11 M, dated January 22, 1931, *ibid*.

[3] In a note on "the development of Congress activities within the boundaries of the Indian States", dated 30 December 1938, G. Ahmed of the Punjab CID had this to say: "I must again emphasize the point that although the Congress as a body is not taking a direct part in political agitation in the Indian States, prominent Congressmen, working under the cloak of one political organisation or another, are trying all they can to stir up unrest among the Indian States subjects. The attitude of the All-India Congress Committee towards the States is stiffening unmistakably.... On the whole, it is clear that as time goes on, the Congress will more and more come out into the open and show its hand more clearly. At the present moment it is not fully prepared to carry on a fight against 'British Imperialism' and 'Indian Autocracy' simultaneously." Enclosure to the letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab, to Linlithgow, Viceroy, dated 3 January 1939, *Linlithgow Papers*, Mss. Eur. F. 125/88.

[4] Ramesh Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement in East Punjab States*, Punjabi University, Patiala, 1972, pp. 11–12.

[5] *Ibid*., p. 7.

[6] Sewa Singh Thikriwala, the most influential Sikh leader from the states and a resident of Patiala, was arrested in 1923 at the height of the Gurdwara Reform Movement and promptly extradited by the Maharaja of Patiala. *Ibid*., p. 51.

anti-feudal character of the Akali Movement led to the dissemination of nationalist and democratic ideas, and brought the people of the states in contact with political currents existing in British India.[7] In 1928, the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal was formed,[8] with the avowed objectives of fighting for the establishment of a representative government and safeguarding the people's rights and liberties.[9]

From then onwards, all political activity in the neighbouring British areas found an echo in Patiala. The Praja Mandal organized widespread participation in the Civil Disobedience Movement; Independence Day, 26 January 1930, was celebrated with great enthusiasm, the national flag was hoisted and many suffered the severe blows of an angry administration.[10] The infamous Hidayat was proclaimed in 1932 banning political meetings and imposing stringent conditions for registration of political organizations.[11] Many important leaders such as Sewa Singh Thikriwala and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia were thrown into jail in 1933;[12] the former never to see freedom again as he died in January 1935 after a prolonged hunger strike protesting

[7] In Walia's view, the awakening in the Punjab States "was in a large measure due to the Gurdwara Reform Movement. The freedom movement in India did not inspire the East Punjab States peoples movement, it only helped it. *The shape, character and the dimensions of the Praja Mandal Movement in East Punjab were determined directly by the movement*" (emphasis added). Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 27.

[8] The birth of the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal was announced at a conference held on 17 July, 1928, at Mansa in Patiala State as part of the Akali leader Baba Kharak Singh's tour to rouse opinion and organize an agitation against the continued detention of Sewa Singh Thikriwala, who had been in jail since 1923 and had now been transferred from the Lahore Fort to the Patiala Central Jail, Sewa Singh was elected the president and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia the general secretary; both leaders were then in jail. *Ibid*., pp. 53–56.

[9] *Ibid*., p. 57. The official reporter noted that "the Akalis, are trying to give a secular character to their movement". *Ibid*., p. 56.

[10] On 26 January 1930, Sewa Singh led a procession, with a "flag of independence" carried in front, from his village Thikriwala to Barnala, the district headquarters, and there held a meeting. At Mansa, on the same day, the national flag was hoisted and a meeting defying the prohibitory orders was held, and cries of "Inqilab Zindabad" rent the air. At Sunam, a procession taking the "Independence flag" was stopped and the leading members namely Harnam Singh Akali of Dharamgarh, Nand Singh Akali of Ugrahan and Kapur Singh Akali of Manderan assaulted the police officers on duty. Consequently, they were *challaned*, convicted and sentenced to various terms of imprisonment. Confidential note by Prime Minister, Patiala, *L/P&S/13/885*.

[11] Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 115. The three "Phulkian" states, Patiala, Nabha and Jind, issued a common decree which was later known as Hidayat 88 because it was signed on 5 Poh 1988 Bikrami. Patiala promulgated it in its territory through a special Firman-i-Shahi dated 14 January 1931. This decree remained in operation till 1946 when it was finally withdrawn.

[12] In the years 1928–33, the Praja Mandal Movement had many victories to its credit. It had secured the release of Sewa Singh twice, once in 1929 and the second time in 1931. It had launched the famous "Indictment of Patiala" and the British Government had been forced, in order to save the Maharaja's honour, to order an official enquiry known as the Fitzpatrick

against his inhuman treatment.[13] The sacrifices of men like Sewa Singh exposed the inhuman, autocratic and irresponsible Patiala regime in which neither life nor honour nor property was safe from the whims of the Maharaja. All this produced a new political ethos and climate which questioned the legitimacy of the traditional authority enjoyed by the ruler.

A favourable climate was thus created for the new ideas of peasant organization and politics that were being generated in the country at large and in Punjab in particular. The Riasti Praja Mandal, which was in any case increasingly becoming a mirror image of the Congress, did not remain untouched by these new ideological and political influences.[14] It too had, within its ranks, political activists who were beginning to subscribe to the more radical ideas advanced by the socialist elements,[15] and in these ideas the peasantry occupied an important position. The Communists and Socialists in Punjab had concentrated most of their attention on organizing the peasants and when the Praja Mandalists sought to put their new ideas into practice, they too turned towards the peasants.

Kisans and *Muzaras*: A Study in Contrast

The resultant peasant movement can be divided into two parts. One was the general peasant or kisan movement and the other the Muzara (or tenants)

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enquiry. Numerous conferences had been held and the Praja Mandal organization, under the leadership of Sewa Singh Thikriwala and Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, had spread to all the East Punjab States. See Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement,* Chapters III, IV and V.

[13] *Ibid*., pp. 117–20.

[14] As early as 1930, at a meeting of the Praja Mandal held at Kharial (district Karnal) under the presidency of Sewa Singh Thikriwala, Sadhu Singh Daler, a member of the Executive Committee of the Mandal, "explained the objects of the 'Kirti Kisan Dal' and exhorted the people to join it. Revolutionary cries of 'Inqilab Zindabad', 'Mr. Das zindabad', 'Bhagat Singh Zindabad',... '*Naukar Shahi ka bera garq*' (Down with Bureaucracy) and '*sarmaya dari ka bera garq*' (Down with Capitalism) were raised. On this occasion the members of the Praja Mandal were found preaching the doctrines of Kirti Kisan, in other words bolshevism". Confidential Note by Prime Minister, Patiala, *L/P&S/13/885*.

[15] Four of the seven office-bearers of the Praja Mandal in 1938 were Socialists—Hira Singh Bhathal, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, Mansa Ram and Giani Sardara Singh Yuthap. (Yuthap was one of the editors of *Kirti Lehar*, a communist journal published from Meerut by Punjab Communists during the period of the UP Congress Ministry 1937–39. He was also the President of the Reception Committee of the Ludhiana session of the AISPC in 1939.) The Punjab Kisan Committee was reported to "be taking an active interest in the States. For some time past it has been maintaining a very close link with the States Peoples and their ambitions and disabilities through the agency of the Riasti Praja Mandal leaders such as Bhagwan Singh of Longowal and Jagir Singh Joga of Phagusinghwala, ex-deportees of the Patiala State.... The Punjab Kisan Committee remained particularly active during 1938 in enlisting the States subjects as its members and forming branches in the Indian States territory... workers of the Committee were busy in the Patiala, Kapurthala and Jind States in distributing

Movement. However, it was the latter that really occupied centre stage in Patiala. Therefore, the discussion here will be focused on the Muzara Movement, except for a brief comment on the kisan movement for purposes of comparison. The kisan movement had as its major thrust of activity the organization of self-cultivating peasants into Kisan Sabhas around the familiar demands of reduction of land revenue and water rates, relief from indebtedness, abolition of *begar* or forced labour, right to *shamlat* or village common land, right of *shikar*, amendment of Nazool laws, etc.[16] These demands were expressed in public meetings, in pamphlets and posters and by political workers who toured the villages trying to organize Kisan Sabhas and enrol Praja Mandal or Kisan Sabha members.[17] However, we find no attempt being made to organize a concerted campaign, either in the form of a no-tax campaign or a major demonstration or *morcha* involving the despatch of *jathas* from all over the state (a form made popular and used with great success by the Akalis), around these issues.[18] This remained true of all the diverse political groups that participated in this activity and this included the Communists, Socialists, Akalis, Congressmen or Praja Mandalists proper.

This movement, given the forms it took and the style of activity it followed, failed to strike deep roots in the state. The reason for this was not that its major demands, that is, reduction of land revenue and water rate, had no meaning for the Patiala kisans. The majority of the cultivators, who paid revenue directly to the state, did indeed suffer from a heavy demand. In fact the pitch of land revenue and water rate was substantially higher than in neighbouring British districts and there was a general clamour that it should be reduced at least to the British level. The reason for the failure lay in the unsuitability of the *forms and techniques* of political activity to the specific conditions in Patiala. The lack of civil liberties (as embodied in the

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membership forms among the peasants." Note by the Punjab CID on "the development of Congress activities within the boundaries of Indian States", dated 30 December 1938. Enclosure to the letter from H.D. Craik, Governor, Punjab to Linlithgow, Viceroy, dated 3 January 1939, *Linlithgow Papers*, MSS Eur F. 125/88.

[16] Many of these demands such as those relating to reduction of land revenue, Nazool laws, *shikar*, popular control over cesses, etc., were formulated at the first meeting of the Praja Mandal at Mansa in 1928. Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 58. In the period 1934–37 the movement focused on attempts to get the recent enhancements in water rate cancelled and secure some reduction in land revenue. *Ibid*., pp. 129–31.

[17] References to these activities are scattered all over our records, but it is impossible to cite them in full at this point. However, some references of files can be given—see, for example, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Files 1546, 1547, 1544, 1555, 1553, 1554, 1559, 1561, 1650, 1574, 1563, 1573.*

[18] Nevertheless, this movement did succeed in putting pressure on the state to introduce some changes—such as the enactment of some debt relief legislation on the lines of the Punjab Restitution of Mortgages Act, etc.

Hidayat), which made it impossible most of the time even to hold a public meeting, made nonsense of a movement that had this as its *chief* form of activity. As a result, most of the public meetings of the state subjects were held on the borders of the state in adjoining British territory. Nor was this a foolproof method, for the states had mutual extradition arrangements with the British government and in any case this could involve only those living within a reasonable distance of the borders, and Patiala was by no means such a tiny state. The organization of Kisan Sabhas, the other major form of activity, also had limited scope since the Hidayat 88 imposed very stringent regulations and conditions for registration of political organizations and non-registration automatically made any organization illegal.

The movement, therefore, remained a poor imitation of the one that inspired it, namely the peasant movement in neighbouring central Punjab. In the British areas, it was possible for peasant organizations to keep up a tempo of political activity, keep alive interest and enthusiasm, even increase peasant involvement while retaining these forms, as they had propagandist value and also exerted pressure on the authorities concerned. But when the *same* demands, the *same* issues, the *same* style of activity were sought to be transferred, by the *same* political organizations (though instead of the Congress, the Praja Mandal acted as the front organization) to neighbouring Patiala, the attempt floundered. It is probably a truism to say that different political set-ups require different types of political strategy and tactics, but this truism was probably lost sight of by those who tried to implant the movement in unfriendly soil. A technique of political action that included no form of "direct action" made little sense in a situation where subtler attempts at pressures were either crushed or ignored by a heavy-handed and thick-skinned administration. In other words, the crucial difference between a hegemonic state (which the British colonial state in India was, in however limited a way) and an autocratic or repressive state (such as Patiala) was not fully appreciated.

This difference, however, was fully visible in practice and the considerable success of the Muzara Movement, also led by the same political groups, demonstrated the viability of the use of different kinds of techniques, which involved participation and pressure of a very different kind. This movement of the tenants of Patiala State developed rapidly into an open confrontation between the tenants and the state and, at many points, brought the government to its knees. The muzaras (or tenants) also held meetings (very often in British territory), joined Kisan Sabhas, went in deputations, sent petitions—just like the kisans—but along with all this they stopped paying rent and, later, took forcible possession of landlords' land. However, it would not be correct to attribute the difference in intensity and success between the two movements to political techniques alone, for there was a difference between the extent to which a landowning peasant would

be willing to go in pursuance of his demands for reduction of land revenue, etc., which for him were not in the nature of a life and death struggle, and the readiness of the muzaras, filled with a deep sense of wrong at having been deprived, within living memory, of hereditary proprietary rights, to fight and sacrifice, for regaining their lost status.

Origins and Early Stirrings: *Muzara* Movement, 1930–1938

The origin of the problem dates back to at least the First Regular Settlement of Patiala made in the first decade of the twentieth century.[19] The Settlement Report, however, claims that the dispute over proprietary right existed prior to the commencement of settlement operations.[20] It seems that when *biswedars* (the local term for landlords), who earlier had only some *mafi* claims or revenue collecting rights, claimed, due to their growing influence in the administration, proprietory status, the tendency was for the courts to grant them this status and relegate the entire body of cultivating proprietors to the position of occupancy tenants.[21] But the effect of the Settlement, too, was "to create causes for disputes where none existed before, and to aggravate ill-feeling where they did exist".[22] The Settlement Commissioner was well aware that he was leaving "to the revenue authorities of the future a legacy of trouble and discord in this connection".[23] However, far from remedying the inequitable court decisions, the Settlement merely accepted and gave further sanction to the status quo, granting full proprietory status to *biswedars*, and the not very great benefit of the Punjab Tenancy Act of 1885 to the tenants.[24] The tenants had protested even while settlement operations were continuing and there was large-scale refusal to pay rent; a hurried temporary attestation of rents was carried out by the Settlement Commissioner, but "so truculent had the tenant body become... that compliance with these orders was not obtained without the adoption of very stringent measures, which do not ordinarily fall within the scope of

[19] *AISPC Papers*, File 133A, 1945–48, folio 253–57; Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 556*, 1929–30.

[20] *Final Report of the Settlement of the Patiala State, A.D. 1908–1909* (hereafter *Settlement Report*), p. 26. "The relations between landlords and tenants ... were strained and bitter, long before the Settlement commenced". *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[21] "The tendency was for the small proprietors, who happened to be shareholders in a village in which someone connected with the official class was an assignee of revenue, or the owner of a predominant interest therein, to become occupancy tenants, and for old tenants in a Biswedari estate to sink to the level of mere tenants-at-will". *Ibid.*, p. 26.

[22] *Settlement Report*, pp. 26–27.

[23] *Ibid.*, p. 27.

[24] *Ibid.*, p. 28. The report also pointed out that "the great majority of the 17,706 cases, which have been fought in the appellate courts of the Settlement, have been concerned with tenants' rights and tenants' liabilities". *Ibid.*

a settlement officer's duties". Thus, "a very serious crisis, which threatened to develop in the direction of murder, arson and agrarian outrages of every description, was averted".[25]

Further, it was not as if their position as occupancy tenants was specially privileged and secure, since all they got was fixity of tenure, but no protection against rack-renting. The Settlement Report noted that "*the capacity of the tenants to resist extortion*, and to maintain their hold on lands which they had brought under cultivation, *rested upon their own strength or obstinacy*, and upon the weakness or the good feeling of their landlords, rather than upon any legal basis" (emphasis added).[26] The landlords had also succeeded in getting issued a "*Hidayat*" in 1872 making it incumbent upon all occupancy tenants to pay rent in kind.[27] Besides, the amount of *batai* or share rent was decided by the *kankut* system, which meant that standing crops were assessed before each harvest by a *kankut* committee consisting of state functionaries and the amount to be given to the *biswedars* fixed accordingly.[28]

The grievances of the tenants of roughly 800 biswedari villages (comprising about one-sixth of the total number in the state), therefore, related to three major issuess (*a*) the loss of proprietory right and reduction in their position in the tenurial structure (*b*) the consequential increase in their obligations to the *biswedars* and (*c*) the *kankut* system in which over-assessment of yield was a constant cause of complaint coupled with the uncertainty of the exact amount to be paid at each harvest.

The *Muzara* Movement that emerged in Patiala in the late 1930s was based on these tenants, who had lost their hereditary proprietary rights by virtue of the fiat of the autocratic state. The state moved at the instance of its officials, who were mainly drawn from the landed élite and who used their autocratic power to feather their own nests as well as those of other members of their class and kith and kin. The erstwhile proprietors, now turned tenants, had refused predictably to accept this devaluation of their economic and social status, especially as this devaluation was all the more galling for being so arbitrary and discriminatory—their kinsmen and friends in many neighbouring villages which had escaped the shift in fortune continued to remain in full possession of their proprietary rights. The new tenants regarded the new landlords as *parvenus*, who had no *legitimate* right to the land which had been theirs for generations, and not in the manner in which a traditional tenantry might regard their old, established, feudal

[25] *Ibid*., p. 29.
[26] *Ibid*., p. 27.
[27] *Ibid*. A similar shift from cash to kind rents occurred in the British-held Punjab as well. In a period of rising prices, which came in the wake of commercialization, landlords, wherever they could, insisted on a share of the produce as rent, as this secured to them an automatic increase in rents.
[28] *AISPC Papers*, File 139 , Part I, 1937–42, folio 295–303.

landowners, whose right to the land had acquired a certain social legitimacy by virtue of its very antiquity. Of course, in addition, the weight of the new rent burden—which was fixed as a share of the produce to be paid in kind—as well as the deterioration in the social status[29] —which, for example, even meant that people from the peasant proprietor or *bhaichara* villages were unwilling to give their daughters in marriage to their kinsmen in the new tenant villages because the daughter would have to suffer the economic and social indignity of being a tenant's wife—made the change in circumstances even more irksome and humiliating and therefore difficult to accept. The situation, then, provided most of the ingredients for a potential flare up—a strong feeling of having been wronged, of legitimate rights being taken away, economic hardship, social humiliation or deprivation, as well as continued resistance or refusal to accept the new position on the part of the more stubborn tenants. The only missing link was that of organization.

But, since these grievances had existed from at least the time of the Settlement, if not earlier, the timing of the movement (in the mid-1930s) is a pointer to wider social influences, economic as well as political. For two decades, high and rising agricultural prices had probably mitigated the impact of a harsh and unwelcome settlement, but problems surfaced when prices crashed in the 1930s as a result of the Depression. *Biswedars* sought to impose their claims with greater efficiency and force as the value of their share declined and peasants resisted partly because they could afford to pay much less but largely because their new political consciousness (a result of widespread participation in the Akali Movement for reform of Sikh shrines) and the possibility of political support (from the Praja Mandal and other political bodies) gave them a new confidence in their own strength. Besides, the death of the notorious Maharaja Bhupinder Singh and the succession to the throne of a young and inexperienced ruler produced at least a brief period of political uncertainty and a hope that old grievances might be redressed if projected vigorously. In many ways, thus, there occurred a confluence of circumstances conducive to the development of new political forces. The outcome was a movement that challenged the authority of the *biswedar* (landlord) as well as that of the state which colluded with and helped maintain the *biswedar* in his position.[30] The movement, once begun, snowballed rapidly for it had strong *historical* as well as *contemporary* roots. The

[29] Many of the leaders we interviewed emphasized this aspect of the deterioration in social status and social oppression by *biswedars* as an important contributory factor in the movement. Jagir Singh Joga, the veteran Communist leader, even went to the extent of saying: "people do not tolerate *beizzati* (indignity), though they may tolerate many other things". Interview.

[30] The *Settlement Report* had noted in the first decade of the twentieth century that there "was throughout the State a strong offensive and defensive alliance between the Ahlkar (official) and Biswedar (landlord) classes. The Ahlkar who was not a Biswedar generally contrived to become one, and the Biswedar found that it was necessary for salvation to obtain a footing in the official camp". *Settlement Report*, p. 7.

tenants had a strong sense of having been wronged and deprived of their rightful and hereditary position and status. The vision of a new world was made doubly attractive by its similarity to the memories of the old world that had been lost.

Trouble had been brewing for quite a while for, as early as 1929, the superintendent of police, CID, Patiala, had reported that the Praja Mandal workers with their base at Mastuana[31] "have now started exciting the tenants of the Biswedars of our state for the non-payment of 'batai'. As it is since after the last settlement the relations between the Biswedars and their tenants are not very healthy, hence the slightest provocation of this kind will act as putting fuel on fire".[32] Soon after, in May 1930, the revenue minister wrote to the vice-president of the Patiala cabinet informing him that in spite of the best efforts of the revenue officer and the nazim of the district, two villages, Rajomajra and Bhadaur, were refusing to give batai to the *biswedars* and that "their ringleaders carry on propaganda against the interest of the state" and "are reported to have been under the influence of the agitators from without the state". He further expressed his fear that "if no proper remedy is sought, the situation may become difficult to be handled in the near future and the neighbouring villages may be affected," and asked for advice on what steps could be taken "to check the unfortunate disease which is growing through the tenant class".[33]

[31] The Akal College, Mastuana (on the Nabha–Jind border), started by a local Sikh divine and financed specially by the deposed Maharaja of Nabha, had become the headquarters of Praja Mandal activities, a sanctuary for political agitators and a distribution centre for Praja Mandal literature. Sewa Singh Thikriwala was the chairman of the managing board. Of the six people arrested in the Ahmedgarh dacoity case, 1929, five had been associated with this college and two of them, Harnam Singh Chamak and Sahib Singh Salana, later became active workers of the Praja Mandal and the Communist Party. The Political Department of the Government of India also expressed concern over Mastuana having become a centre of communist and other revolutionary propaganda. Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 556*, 1929–30; Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, pp. 78–80.

[32] Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 556*, 1929–30.

[33] Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 639*, 1930; Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 96. Walia also adds: "The Rajomajra tenants were probably the first to take the path of struggle. In June 1930, eighty-six of them were detected by the state informers at Kalka on their way to Simla to represent their grievances to the Agent to the Governor-General and the Viceroy". *Ibid.*, p. 96. Fitzpatrick, the political agent, who was holding an enquiry into the allegations contained in "Indictment of Patiala", wrote that he had examined the bundle of petitions forwarded to him and that "nearly all the petitions relate to land and are mostly from the tenants against landlords and Biswedars. Complaints have been made that their permanent rights in the land have been ignored and Sardars have been made Biswedars in the land broken by their ancestors and held in continued and uninterrupted possession. Nearly all petitions are addressed to the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal and a reference is made to the news that the Mandal has taken upon itself the work of representing the grievances of the state zamindars to the government of India." Confidential D.O. from J.A.O. Fitzpatrick to Sir Charles Watson, Political Secretary to the Government of India in the Foreign and Political Department, Simla, dated Camp Mashobra, 29 May 1930, *L/P&S/13/885*.

Further developments took place in 1931.[34] In June and July, tenant grievances were voiced at a series of Akali–Praja Mandal *dewans*[35] held at Bhutna (or Bhutan) in Ludhiana District, at Mohee, Mansa, Bhadaur, Ubha and Dhuri.[36] At Bhutna, Golbadan Singh, a leading member of the Kisan Sabha, Ludhiana, and others "delivered fiery speeches with a view to promoting agrarian trouble".[37] This *dewan* was reported to have been largely attended by peasants and tenants from the Barnala District of Patiala and it was announced that another *dewan* would soon be held at Bhadaur to discuss the tenants' problem.[38] The other *dewans* mentioned earlier (except Dhuri) ended in fiascos because of *biswedar* opposition.[39] This prompted the organizers of the *dewans* to "make plans for a stronger show" at Dhuri. A procession was taken through the *mandi* of the town to the gurdwara where the *dewan* was being held with Sewa Singh Thikriwala in the chair. Speeches were made, including one by Wazir Singh Daftriwala, a prominent Praja Mandalist, promising emancipation of tenants from the control of landlords and the freeing of rajas and maharajas from the control of the British. Here, too, an attempt was made to disrupt the meeting and a fight ensued; the police party which tried to enter the gurdwara was obstructed by armed Akali *sewadars* and then belaboured and badly mauled. Finally, arrests were made, which included those of Wazir Singh Daftriwala and Harnam Singh Dharamgarh (who later became one of the prominent leaders of the tenants' struggle). All the meetings mentioned earlier were attended by Sewa Singh Thikriwala and were part of the campaign leading up to the third

[34] Earlier, the Ludhiana session of the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal held in October 1930 passed resolutions condemning the state for depriving the *muzaras* of several villages of their proprietory rights over their land and also expressed sympathy with the *muzaras* of village Rajomajra. Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 609*, 1930.

[35] The term "*dewan*" usually denoted a Sikh religious meeting or gathering held in the *gurdwara*. During the Akali Movement, which had a religious-cum-political character, the term was used more widely for public meetings associated with the movement. In Patiala, even after the Akali Movement came to an end, most political meetings were announced by the Praja Mandalists (most of whom were products of the Akali Movement) as *dewans* in order to circumvent the stringent conditions in the state, as it was much more difficult for the administration to interfere with an ostensibly religious assembly.

[36] Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 655*, 1931.

[37] *Ibid*.

[38] *Ibid*.

[39] The *biswedars* adopted the practice of crowding these *dewans* with their own supporters and disrupting the proceedings. Intimidation of Akali–Praja Mandal sympathizers was also tried. *Ibid*. Walia comments: "A new method now used was the mobilisation of the Biswedars (feudal-lords) and their men on a large scale to intimidate the Praja Mandal workers inside the state and disrupt the Praja Mandal conferences in British territory. With tenants joining the Praja Mandal Movement the Biswedars rallied round the Maharaja and his administration. They were giving assurances of their loyalty and placing their services at the disposal of the state." Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 108.

annual conference of the Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal held at Simla in July 1931.[40]

Reports of refusal to pay *batai* had also been received in 1931 from Qila Hakiman, a village that was to become famous later as a centre of the tenants' movement.[41] The agitation here was against the new *biswedar*, Jai Singh, who had purchased the *biswedari* rights from absentee landlords and was enforcing his claims with the aid of *mukhtiars* (agents) who had become notorious in the village for their overbearing attitude.[42] Attempts to enforce decrees against some tenants had resulted in a violent clash[43] and the institution of an enquiry after the tenants went in a body to complain against the *biswedars*.[44] A preliminary enquiry resulted in the return of 300 bighas of land to the tenants but, since the government made no arrangement for *biswedars*' share to be collected by an official receiver, it seems no *batai* was paid by the tenants till at least 1936.[45]

These early stirrings did not, however, go very far in the direction of a widespread movement. For one, between 1931 and 1933, till Sewa Singh Thikriwala was arrested, the Praja Mandal largely concentrated attention on the agitation against the autocratic rule of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh and on the question of introduction of responsible government in the state.[46] In the meantime, of course, the promulgation of the Royal Hidayat in January 1932 had made political activity within the state even more difficult. With Sewa Singh's arrest in August 1933, and his consequent hunger-strike (which ultimately led to his death in jail in 1935), all concern had shifted to efforts to secure his release.[47] After Sewa Singh's death, the despair and disillusionment among the Praja Mandal workers was further enhanced by Master Tara Singh's pact with Maharaja Bhupinder Singh in early 1935.[48] The deal was struck with the objective of securing for the Akali leader the support of the Maharaja against his opponents in the Shiromani Akali Dal (who had earlier enjoyed the confidence of the Maharaja), and for the Maharaja a respite from the agitation of the Praja Mandal, in which the Akalis had a predominant

[40] This account is based on the IGP, Patiala's confidential note contained in Patiala State Records. *PM's Office File 655*, 1931, and Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, pp. 95, 105, 107.

[41] Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 6157*, 1931.

[42] Confidential D.O. letter no. 20/C dated 5 June 1931 from the Minister of Law and Justice to the Prime Minister, Patiala, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 6157*, 1931.

[43] The *biswedars' mukhtiars* opened fire on tenants who were obstructing the attachment of certain property. *Ibid.*

[44] Petition submitted by the biswedars of Qila Hakiman to the prime minister, Patiala on 8 February 1936. *Ibid.*

[45] *Ibid.*

[46] Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, pp. 109–16.

[47] *Ibid.*, pp. 116–21.

[48] *Ibid.*, pp. 123–24, p. 129.

influence.[49] The pact was, however, roundly condemned by all shades of opinion within the Praja Mandal, including the group led by Harchand Singh Jeji, a close friend of Master Tara Singh.[50] Nevertheless, it resulted in the release of large numbers of Praja Mandal leaders and workers, including Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, now fired with a new determination to avenge Sewa Singh's death by carrying on an uncompromising struggle for the removal of the Maharaja.[51]

Another significant development was the appearance of the Communist-led Kisan Committees under the influence and direction of Praja Mandal leaders such as Bhagwan Singh Longowalia and Jagir Singh Joga, who had increasingly come to identify themselves with the Communist current and its new emphasis on the organization of Kisan Sabhas.[52] Their own ideological shift towards the left and their growing hold over Praja Mandal workers was no doubt influenced by their disillusionment with the Akali current and Master Tara Singh's pact with the Maharaja.[53] From 1936 onwards, Punjab Communist and Socialist leaders were to be seen addressing Praja Mandal conferences in and outside the Punjab states.[54] At Praja Mandal conferences peasants were asked to enroll themselves as members of Kisan Committees in response to the call of the All-India Kisan Sabha.[55]

The situation took a new turn at the end of 1937 when a violent clash broke out between the tenants and the police on 25 November 1937 at

[49] *Ibid.*, pp. 125–26. Allegations of having accepted money (Rs 2 lakh) from the Maharaja were also made against Master Tara Singh. *Ibid.* p. 128.

[50] *Ibid.*, pp. 126–28.

[51] *Ibid.*, pp. 125–28.

[52] Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1544 and 1546*, 1937. The IG, police, Patiala issued a circular order to all nazims and SPs to submit regular weekly reports in view of the recent activities of the Praja Mandal, their identification with communist and socialist tendencies, and plans to form kisan committees and Praja Mandal branches. Circular Order No. 15, dated 28 August 1937, *Ibid.*, File 1546.

[53] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 30 June 1937, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1546*. This is a report on the fifth annual conference of the Riasti Praja Mandal held at Amritsar from 8–10 June 1937 and it notes the intermingling of people attending this conference as well as the conferences of the Punjab Provincial Congress Socialist Party and the Civil Liberties Union being held on 6 and 7 June.

[54] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 13 August 1937, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1546*, 1937; Copy of report, dated 20 April 1939 (August 1936) from Inspector, CID, Patiala, on proceedings of a Praja Mandal meeting held at Khanna on 2 August 1936 under the presidency of Sohan Singh Josh, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 740*, 1936; Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, pp. 134–35. Sohan Singh Josh, B.P.L. Bedi, Arjan Singh Gargaj, Karam Singh Mann and Baba Rur Singh are mentioned as the more important Communist leaders invited to speak. *Ibid*.

[55] Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 13 August 1937, 21 October 1937, 1 January 1938 etc., Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1546 and 1547*; Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, pp. 131–32.

village Qila Hakiman over the payment of *batai*.[56] Two died and nine were wounded in this encounter—the tenants maintained that they were peacefully urging the police and the landlords not to take away their crops whereas the official version was that the police fired in self-defence when attacked with brickbats by a mob of 300 or 400 tenants. The tenants further alleged that the landlords had also participated in the firing.[57] However, this development was by no means sudden or unexpected, for Qila Hakiman had been contesting the *biswedars'* rights for a long time, and earlier in the year, in June 1937, the nazim had spent a week in the village forcing the tenants to pay *batai*.[58] This had resulted in the tenants' arrival at Patiala, in 30 bullock-carts, to protest against the forcible realization of *batai*.[59] Six other villages had followed suit, and had paid up the *batai* only under police supervision.[60]

The November clash attracted a lot of attention. An official enquiry was conducted by J.N. Mukherji, Special Magistrate, who, predictably enough, condemned the peasants for their "defiance of authority" and exonerated the police of the charge of having used too much force.[61] The Punjab Riasti Praja Mandal appointed an enquiry committee consisting of Master Hari Singh, MLA, Lala Achint Ram of the Servants of People Society and Wazir Singh Daftriwala, a Praja Mandal leader of Patiala.[62] This committee upheld the charges of unnecessary use of force, unlawful firing by landlords and believed that the tenants were unarmed and peaceful.[63] The publicity received as a result of all this activity brought the tenants' question to the centre of the stage, so to speak, and provided a new momentum to the movement for redressal of their grievances.

Throughout 1938, for a variety of reasons, the issue of the tenants' agitation came increasingly to the fore. The process of realignment within the

[56] "Practically the whole village had turned out to oppose batai." Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20 December 1937, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1546*, Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 132.

[57] This account is based on the Confidential Weekly Report by the IGP, Patiala, dated 20 December 1937, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1546*, and Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, pp. 132–33.

[58] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 26 May 1937, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1546*. The nazim had reported that the tenants, along with their women, had gathered armed with stones and sticks but had been persuaded to disperse. *Ibid*.

[59] *Ibid*.

[60] The villages concerned were Kishangarh, Khewa, Gurthari, Rampura, Bhadaur and Dhepai. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 21 June 1937, *ibid*.

[61] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20 December 1937, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1546*; Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 132.

[62] Many other Praja Mandal leaders and activists also visited the village and took interest in the affair. In fact, this so worried the authorities that special police was posted to prevent "outsiders" from talking to the people. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20 December 1937, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1546*.

[63] *Ibid*., Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 133.

Praja Mandal, begun after the Master Tara Singh–Bhupinder Singh Pact, finally matured into an almost open split.[64] The death of Maharaja Bhupinder Singh in February and the accession to the throne of Yadavindra Singh and his marriage with Harchand Singh Jeji's daughter weaned away the section of the Praja Mandal under the latter's influence to a policy of moderation. This also had the effect of making it easier for the group with socialist leanings to establish their hold on the movement, an attempt they had been making for some time now, and to guide the movement towards a more militant path. New links were forged with the existing discontent among the tenants and efforts made to speed up the formation of kisan committees and Congress committees in the *biswedari* villages.[65] The effects were soon visible; it was reported that some tenants had been to see Master Hari Singh, the Kapurthala kisan leader, and S. Gopal Singh, MLA, to ask them for help in their struggle.[66] Pamphlets were brought out on the Qila Hakiman incident[67] and the tenants of this village were urged to appeal to the Punjab Kisan Committee, Amritsar.[68] Official sources reported that tenants were becoming inclined to attend kisan and other political conferences held outside the state.[69] In December 1938, the Muzara Committee was formed to undertake the task of coordinating, guiding and doing propaganda on behalf of the movement.[70] The formation of this committee signified that a certain decisive moment in the development of the movement had arrived. The rapid pace at which the movement developed and spread in 1939 is proof that this was indeed so.

Kisan Committee Leads, *Muzaras* Refuse *Batai*: 1939–40

The first half of 1939 witnessed a rapid horizontal widening of the Muzara Movement. Refusal to pay *batai* became common in villages located in the

[64] Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 134; Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10 August 1928 and 28 September 1938, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1547*.
[65] Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 1 January 1938, 28 February 1938, 8 August 1938, 22 August 1938, 10 October 1938, 27 November 1938, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1547*. In the view of the IGP, Patiala, Praja Mandal, Kisan organizations and Congress committees were all the same. This probably reflects the increasing influence of the Socialist and Communist elements. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27 November 1938, *Ibid*.
[66] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 28 February 1938, *ibid*.
[67] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 8 August 1938 and 20 February 1939, *ibid*.
[68] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 8 August 1938, *ibid*. Meanwhile, the Qila Hakiman tenants continued to refuse *batai* and their crops were harvested by the forced labour of neighbouring village servants. A *dewan* was held at which protests against this forcible harvesting of crops was voiced. The tenants also went to Patiala to protest. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 17 July 1938, *ibid*.
[69] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 28 February 1938, *ibid*.
[70] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 1 March 1939, *ibid*.

Patiala, Sunam and Barnala districts of the state.[71] There were reports of violent clashes between *biswedars* and *muzaras*.[72] In some places, tenants tried to take forcible possession of land from which they had been dispossessed.[73] In others, *muzaras* ploughed over standing crops to avoid giving *batai*.[74] The government retaliated with arrests of political workers, institution of cases against tenants, physical prevention of *muzaras* from attending political meetings and detailing of additional police to help in recovery of *batai* and open repression.[75] Punitive police was posted in the two most notorious villages—Qila Hakiman and Kishangarh.[76]

There were clear indications that the Praja Mandal had close links with and was playing an important role in the organization of this movement.[77] The annual session of the AISPC held at Ludhiana in February 1939 was

[71] *Ibid.*; Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 29 March 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1547*; Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 20 April 1939, 1 May 1939, 19 May 1939, 31 May 1938, 2 June 1939, 9 June 1939, 30 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1554 and 1555*. In village Bhadaur, the tenants along with their women collected in large numbers on 14 May 1939 to take "an oath in the presence of the holy Guru Granth Sahib to be loyal and true to their cause and to stick to non-payment of batai till death. They have opened a common 'langar' in which their helpers and advisers coming from outside and within the State take their meals freely. On 15 May 1939 the Muzaras pledged themselves in the presence of the holy Guru Granth Sahib not to also sow the forthcoming cotton crop and leave the already leased land of the Biswedars". CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 May 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1554*.

[72] Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 31 May 1939, 2 June 1939, 9 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1554*.

[73] Kishangarh and Qila Hakiman were particularly noted for this. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 2 June 1939 and 9 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1544*.

[74] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 30 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[75] Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 29 March 1939, 20 April 1939, 1 May 1939, 19 May 1939, 31 May 1939, 2 June 1939, 9 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1547 and 1554*. The SP of Barnala proudly recounted how he got the tenants of Kishangarh, Pharwahi and Chokerian to start paying up *batai* by using threats of beatings and confiscation of pensions and by arrests. D.O. letter No. 199/C dated 8 May 1939 from the Superintendent of Police, Barnala to the Inspector General of Police, Patiala, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar Movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.

[76] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20 April 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1554*.

[77] The inspector general of police, Patiala, observed that "the Kisan, Congress and Praja Mandal agitators, a few local but most of them from outside, have, for some time past, been trying to get at the tenants of Biswedari villages and inducing them to refuse to give Batai on one pretext or another.... The result of this was that the trouble, which was hitherto confined to a few villages here and there, spread to many other villages too...." Letter No. 6742-X-C dated 30 June 1939 from Khan Bahadur S. Rana Talia Muhammad Khan, Inspector General of Police, Patiala to the Foreign Minister, His Highness' Government, Patiala, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar Movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.

attended by about 350 state subjects.[78] Speeches made at a fair held at Gharachon in February exhorted a peasant audience of 1,500 to join the Praja Mandal and Kisan committees[79] and, at another fair held in March, in spite of stern police measures, a meeting of tenants was held at which *muzara* demands were raised.[80] The connection with the Ludhiana Kisan Committee had become very clear at the Jethuke Muzara Conference (which, according to the IGP, Patiala, was "mainly responsible for the whole Muzara trouble") held on 22 and 23 April 1939, at which Master Gajjan Singh of Gobindgarh, President, Kisan Committee, Ludhiana District, had been the president.[81] The Central Kisan Organization at Amritsar (obviously a reference to the PKC, Amritsar) was also reported to be taking a "keen interest in intensifying the tenants agitation".[82] A conference of 100 *muzaras* of some 10 villages was held at Shehna in Ludhiana District on 19 May where it was decided to send petitions to the Maharaja demanding abolition of the *batai* system and realisation of land revenue in cash instead.[83] The Praja Mandal also appointed an enquiry committee to investigate the grievances of the tenants of village Kishangarh.[84]

While continuing to refuse *batai*,[85] the tenants soon began to adopt other methods as well to bring their problems into public notice. Some went to

[78] About 2,000 were expected to attend this conference from Patiala State, but arrests of certain leaders frightened them and only 350 turned up. It seems also that Patiala political workers were somewhat disappointed with the conference as Patiala problems did not receive the prominence they desired. There was talk of turning to S.C. Bose for help, as Nehru (the president-elect to the conference) had proved disappointing. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 24 February 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1547*. Posters brought out by Satpal Azad, General Secretary, Patiala State Congress Committee, on the Qila Hakiman incident were distributed at the Ludhiana Conference. *Ibid*.

[79] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3 March 1939, *ibid*.

[80] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 29 March 1939, *ibid*.

[81] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence dated 9 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1554*; *The Tribune*, 3 May 1939.

[82] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10 June 1939, *ibid*. The IGP, Patiala, also commented that "the chief and more strong wire-pulling has been emanating from the Kisan, the Socialist and the Congress organization in the neighbouring territory of the Ludhiana district". *Ibid*.

[83] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2 June 1939, *ibid*.

[84] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19 May 1939, *ibid*.

[85] The revenue minister noted that "the unrestricted preaching by certain *Jathas* and individual agitators from outside and inside the state has resulted in tenants in many villages, particularly on the border, resolving not to pay Batai to landlords. *The movement* has not been confined to occupancy tenants only but *has spread to tenants-at-will as well*. The result has been that in villages, such as Kot-Duna, Pharwahi, Bhadaur, Karamgarh where there had never been any difficulty in the payment of Batai by tenants to landlords, the tenants have refused to pay Batai on any account.... It (the muzara movement) *has begun to assume the shape of a mass movement*" (emphasis added). Confidential note on "The Non-Payment of Batai Movement" by Hari Kishan Kaul, Revenue Minister, Patiala, dated 2 June 1939, Camp Westfield Simla-E, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar Movement in Patiala State," Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.

see the IG police, Patiala,[86] others the SP and nazim of their area[87] and still others went all the way to Chail in the Simla hills to meet the Maharaja.[88] Finally, it was decided to send a deputation or *jatha* of 100 *muzaras* on foot to Simla to meet the British resident. This *jatha* started from Takhtpura in Ferozepore District on the 1st of June 1939 and marched through various villages on way to Ludhiana, stopping at many points where prominent kisan leaders would address the gathering.[89] The *jatha* repeatedly raised the slogans, "Muzara Committee, Zindabad" and "Biswedari system, murdabad"—and distributed posters describing the oppression of the *biswedars* and the suffering of the *muzaras*.[90] At Ludhiana, the *jatha* was "persuaded" by the authorities to send a deputation of five persons to Simla to meet the resident.[91] Trouble arose, however, over the inclusion of Pandit Muni Lal Kalia, an MLA and prominent Congressman of Ludhiana District, in the deputation of five. The resident refused to meet Pandit Kalia on the ground that he was not a Patiala subject and the deputation refused to meet the resident without Kalia.[92] Public meetings were held in Simla under the auspices of the Praja Mandal at which the attitude of the resident was condemned and the demands of the Patiala kisans elaborated.[93]

The deputation left Simla without seeing the resident and the *jatha* of 100 tenants again resumed its march to Simla.[94] Again, the *jatha* stopped *en route* at many villages and was extended full support by the local Congress committees, welcomed enthusiastically by villagers and addressed by

[86] Tenants of Village Kishangarh came to see the IGP on 29 April to protest against the imposition of a punitive police post and police highhandedness, those of villages Kharaksinghwala and Karamgarh came to express their inability to pay *batai*. Bhadaur tenants also came to the IGP on 19 May. Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 1 May 1939, 31 May 1939 and 19 May 1939, *ibid*.

[87] Three hundered *muzaras* of Bhadaur met the nazim and SP, Barnala and laid their grievances before them and stated that they were on no account prepared to pay *batai*. They were followed by 200 *muzara* women who also met the district authorities. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 May 1939, *ibid*.

[88] Thirty-four *muzaras* of village Kishangarh reached Chail on 12 May 1939 and five of them met the Maharaja. *Ibid*.

[89] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9 June 1939, *ibid*.

[90] *Ibid*. The posters in Gurmukhi were titled—"*Nirdai Biswedaran de zulman da shikar hoke ujre hoe mazlooman di rawangi*" (the departure of the ruined victims of heart-less biswedari oppression) and "*Zalim ate nirdai Biswedaran di Nadarshahi*" (the terror of cruel and heartless biswedars).

[91] FR(1) June 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/6/39; *The Tribune*, 13 June 1939; CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1554*.

[92] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*; FR(1) June 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/6/39; *The Tribune*, 13 June 1939.

[93] *The Tribune*, 14 June 1939; CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[94] *Ibid*.

numerous Congress and Kisan leaders.[95] The members of the *jatha* were asked to form a Kisan Committee in Patiala and get it affiliated to the Punjab Kisan Committee.[96] After a few days march through the Ludhiana and Ambala districts, the *jatha* was again stopped by a police party at village Chuhr Majra in Ambala District and five of their members were escorted to Simla while the rest were taken to village Shehna in Ludhiana District.[97] The resident had a long interview with the five representatives in which they put forward all their demands as well as expressed their apprehension that they would be attacked by the Patiala authorities on their return.[98] The revenue minister, Patiala State, also met the deputation in Simla and assured its members that they would not be punished for their participation in the *jatha*.[99] The deputation then returned to Ludhiana where it discussed the implications of their meeting with the resident with the local leaders and from there it went to Shehna where the bulk of the *jatha* was awaiting them and then dispersed.[100]

The Simla deputation had a wide ranging impact. For one, it gave the *Muzara Movement* a province-wide publicity; second, it established clearly and publicly the links with the Congress and Kisan leadership; third, it gave an opportunity for propaganda among villages lying on the route of the *jatha*; and finally, the pressure of the resident secured in July 1939 the appointment of an Enquiry Commission by the Maharaja to investigate the grievances of the *muzaras*.[101] Although the Enquiry Commission was immediately condemned by the Praja Mandal for being an eye-wash as it

[95] The *Tribune*, 16 June 1939; CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[96] This appeal was made by Master Gajjan Singh, President, Kisan Committee, Ludhiana District, CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[97] *The Tribune*, 25 June 1939; Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[98] *Ibid*. The tenants complained to the resident about the manner in which they had been deprived of their proprietory rights to the land some 30 years ago, the high pitch of existing rents and the objectionable methods used for their realization. *The Tribune*, 25 June 1939.

[99] Commenting on this, the IGP, Patiala, noted that since some of them were already wanted by the police in connection with cases registered against them, he had instructed the district authorities not to arrest them at once, but to delay the completion of investigation in such cases by a week or two. Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27 June 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[100] *Ibid*.

[101] Order No. 23 of Ijlas-i-Khas, Patiala, dated 17 July 1939, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar Movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*. The Commission was "to enquire into the causes of disputes between the Biswedars and occupancy tenants generally and with particular reference to those in villages (*a*) Kishangarh Sedhasinghwala (*b*) Raipur Qila Hakiman (*c*) Rajomajra (*d*) Bhadaur (*e*) Karamgarh (*f*) Rampura (*g*) Dhansingh Khana (*h*) Khewa Shahzadsinghwala (*i*) Kot Duna (*j*) Pherwahi Kishangarh". *Ibid*.

contained only official members,[102] yet its appointment was seen as a distinct victory by the *muzaras*.[103] The chief lesson that appears to have gone home was that agitation produces results, for, far from waiting for the report of the Enquiry Commission, the *muzaras* continued with their refusal to pay *batai* and more and more villages began to join the movement.

Throughout the second half of 1939, reports of heightened *muzara* activities continued to pour in. The SP, Barnala, wrote in to say that the *muzaras* of the district had resolved to take back mortgaged lands from creditors and that 80 or 90 of them had already done so. He also reported that the *Muzara* Movement continued to grow in his district.[104] The *muzaras* of village Qila Hakiman took over the *biswedars*' lands of which they had been dispossessed, and began to till them.[105] The IG police, Patiala, observed in his weekly report that, though *batai* had been effected in some important villages, "the attitude of the tenants generally continues to be somewhat truculent and obstinate".[106] The hope of early settlement of the dispute, spread by the participants in the Simla *jatha* who had returned to their villages, was considered by the IG as being largely responsible for this continuing defiance.[107] He also noted a change towards a hostile attitude among tenants who had already given some *batai* and had been inclined to give more.[108] He concluded that "indications are that in most of the Biswedari villages 'batai' will have to be taken practically by force and on each such occasion there are bound to be unpleasant incidents".[109]

Later developments conformed to this assessment. This was in no small measure a result of the hectic pace of political activity kept up by the Praja Mandal workers and *muzara* leaders. Numerous posters were printed and distributed, some stating the *muzara* demands and recounting stories of *biswedars*' oppression while others announced dates and venues of political meetings being held in British districts just across the Patiala borders.[110]

[102] The Commission consisted of the following: Captain Sardar Madanmohan Nath Raina, Minister of Law, Chairman; Sirdar D.K. Sen, Foreign and Education Minister, Member; Major S. Harbans Singh, Revenue Commissioner, Member; and Sirdar Fazal-I-Hamid, Assistant Secretary, Constitution, Secretary. *Ibid*.

[103] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 12 August 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[104] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 30 June 1939, *ibid*.

[105] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 14 July 1939, *ibid*.

[106] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 16 July 1939, *ibid*.

[107] "The tenants at large have been led to believe that they will be declared owners of land very shortly and that if no satisfactory decision is announced within a month of the *Jatha's* return from Simla, the tenants should be prepared to organize more *jathas* to intensify further agitation". *Ibid*.

[108] This observation related to village Bhadaur. *Ibid*.

[109] *Ibid*.

[110] CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 14 July 1939, 28 July 1939, 8 September 1939, 15 September 1939, 6 October 1939, 13 October 1939, 27 October 1939. Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555 and 1553*.

Tenants were flocking to these meetings in increasing numbers in spite of the efforts of local authorities.[111] Many such meetings were reported to have been held in the adjoining Ferozepore, Hissar and Karnal districts at which *muzara* demands were raised, release of political workers demanded and the state asked to fulfil the promises made by the resident.[112] The tone of these gatherings soon began to get sharper: at an important meeting of 150 tenants, held at Budhlada in Hissar District from 14 August to 16 August, resolutions were passed which said that no *batai* was to be paid at all in the current *kharif* crop, tenants were not to give evidence before the Enquiry Commission and a propaganda committee was to be formed in each tehsil to preach non-payment of *batai*.[113] A later meeting, on 26 September, at the same place, decided in favour of a tougher line of action—no *batai*, no social contact with *biswedars*, crops to be destroyed if police tries to enforce *batai*, no fines to be paid, *kamins* or village servants to be told not to work for *biswedars* or else face the prospect of being thrown out of the village.[114]

The intensification of the movement also attracted more and more political workers to its fold.[115] Many were reported to be moving around the villages encouraging those tenants who tended to hesitate.[116] Besides, a gradual change in the political complexion of those leading the movement seemed to be taking place. While in the earlier phase, Ujagar Singh Bhaura, who was identified with the loyalist Akali group led by Jeji, had been more active, the fear expressed by the IG that as the movement grows stronger it might slip out of his grasp[117] appeared to have been

[111] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 12 August 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[112] Meetings were held at Dodra in Hissar District on 13 July 1939, at Chak Ramsinghwala in Ferozepore District on 25 July 1939, at Khadial in Karnal District on 5 August 1939, at Bhadaur in Patiala on 2 August 1939, at Assarpur in Karnal District in October, at Alampur Mandran in Patiala on 25 August 1939, at Dhabali in Ludhiana District on 6 October 1939, at Dharamgarh in Patiala on 8 October 1939 and 10 October 1939, at Qasaiwara in Patiala on 29 September 1939, besides many others. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 14 July 1939, 28 July 1939, 11 August 1939, 6 October 1939, 13 October 1939 and 20 October 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555 and 1553*.

[113] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 25 August 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[114] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence dated 6 October 1939 and Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10 October 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*. Budhlada in Hissar District soon became the headquarters of the Muzara Committee and a refuge for *muzaras* who fled from the state either to avoid paying *batai* or to escape from the law. It had long served as the headquarters of the Praja Mandal as well.

[115] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19 September 1939, *ibid*.

[116] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 28 July 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[117] The IG had noted that the object of the loyalist Akalis of Ujagar Singh Bhaura's party appeared to be to build up opposition, by means of involvement in *muzara* activities, to the Longowalia group, which held extreme views. But, he said, this involved "two grave dangers.

justified.[118] For example, Ujagar Singh Bhaura's appeal on behalf of the Akali *Jatha*, Patiala, asking *muzaras* to take to a constitutional path seems to have fallen on deaf ears.[119] People with more radical views were seen to be moving into the leadership—Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Jagir Singh Phaguwalia, Wazir Singh Daftriwala, Pritam Sigh Gujjran and others.[120] Another index of this change was, in the words of the IG, that "a gradual fusion of the so-called Praja Mandal, Congress and Kisan workers appears to be in the course of making ... although retaining separate outside entities".[121] The name of the Muzara Committee, too, was soon changed to Kisan Muzara Committee.[122]

As a result, a further stiffening of the tenants' attitude was noticed. *Batai* of autumn crops, it was reported, was "generally not being given".[123] From August to November 1939, police reports repeated *ad infinitum*: "situation is worsening", "further deterioration in situation", "further villages refusing batai", "new villages refusing", "more villages refuse to pay batai".[124] It was also reported that *biswedars* were finding it difficult to live in the

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One is that by this method Ujagar Singh Bhaura's party is endeavouring to acquire some political power which could be used in time of need as a threat to the Administration. The second is that when this agitation assumes great proportion the tenants may get out of their hands too ... this seems to be playing with fire...." Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 1 March 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1547*.

[118] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 6 October 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

[119] Proceedings of a meeting of the Working Committee of the Akali *Jatha*, Patiala State, held at Dhuri on 1 October 1939, CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 6 October 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

[120] Of these, Wazir Singh Daftriwala and Jagir Singh Phaguwalia moved towards setting up a new States' Akali Dal, later called Shiromani Malwa Riasti Akali Dal, to counter the collaborationist Akali Dal led by Bhaura and Jeji which was affiliated to Shiromani Akali Dal, Amritsar, then under the control of Master Tara Singh. Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 23 June 1939, 30 June 1939, 8 September 1939, 29 September 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555 and 1553*. Harnam Singh's connections were with the Punjab Kisan Committee, and he subsequently became President of the Patiala Kisan Committee.

[121] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19 September 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

[122] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 6 October 1939, *ibid*. The inclusion of the word "Kisan" in the name of the organization was a sure indication of Communist influence; this is precisely what happened in British Punjab in the early 1930s when under Communist and Kirti influence Zamindar Sabhas changed their names to Kisan Sabhas.

[123] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 9 September, *ibid*. Petitions from tenants of different villages, 29 May 1939, 3 August 1939, 31 January 1939, 14 September 1939 expressing inability to pay *batai*. Patiala State Records, *PM' s Office File 5982*.

[124] Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 16 July 1939, 28 July 1939, 12 August 1939, 13 September 1939, 19 September 1939, 29 September 1939, 3 October 1939, 10 October 1939, 21 October 1939; CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence dated 4 August 1939, 11 August 1939, 13 October 1939, 20 October 1939, 27 October 1939, 3 November 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555 and 1553*.

villages any more[125] and that almost all *batai* was being done under police supervision.[126] Kishangarh tenants, while withholding *batai*, further refused to pay the punitive tax and took possession of *biswedars'* land.[127] A clash occurred again at Qila Hakiman when *biswedar* Jai Singh's men tried to take away crops from disputed fields.[128]

The government took serious note of the situation, which "appear(ed) to be gradually, though slowly, worsening".[129] The institution of security cases did not seem to be having much "effect in imposing a check on the feelings of hatred, which appear to be spreading amongst the Muzaras of so many Biswedari villages".[130] The provision of more and more additional police for assisting in *batai* operations was also not a permanent answer; besides, it was expensive. The earlier policy advocating "stern action" and "prompt measures" had not produced the desired ends,[131] and though even "His Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mohendra Bahadur" had indeed been pleased to command "that this tenants' Movement must be stopped and strong action taken",[132] events failed to conform to his royal wish. In the same vein, the revenue minister informed the prime minister that he had ordered the collection of the cost of punitive police from Kishangarh tenants even if it involved selling movable property, house property and occupancy rights.[133] Nevertheless, at the high level meeting called by the revenue minister on 26 September, and attended by the law and agriculture ministers, the revenue commissioner, the IGP, nazims and SPs,[134] to discuss the *Muzara* Movement, no new departures in policy were conceived.

[125] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, 29 September 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.
[126] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3 November 1939, *ibid*.
[127] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 4 August 1939, and Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 13 September 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.
[128] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 3 October 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.
[129] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 29 September 1939, *ibid*.
[130] Confidential Weekly Report from the IGP, Patiala, dated 19 September 1939, *ibid*.
[131] Confidential letter No. 733/H dated 24 April 1939 from the private secretary to His Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mohendra Bahadur Patiala to the revenue minister, Patiala, and copy of telephonic message dated 14 May 1939 from the inspector general of police, Patiala to the private secretary to His Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mohendra Bahadur, reporting on a conference, attended by the revenue commissioner, nazims and superintendents of police, held to discuss the Muzara Movement, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar movement in the Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.
[132] Letter No. 67/C dated 3 May 1939 from the secretary to the prime minister, His Highness' government, Patiala to the inspector general of police, Patiala, *ibid*.
[133] Letter No. 1089/C dated 18 August 1939 from the revenue minister, His Highness' government, Patiala to the prime minister, His Highness' government, Patiala, "Subsidiary File regarding Kishangarh Affairs", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 5804*.
[134] Confidential Weekly Report dated 29 September 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

It was proposed to raise 200 extra police immediately, take strong action in six or eight villages and put "ringleaders" on heavy security.[135] The meeting also noted that the landlords were the bulwark of the administration, a loyal element and hence must be protected; the fear was expressed that the movement, if not checked, would grow into a kisan movement.[136] The Maharaja approved[137] and the policy was pressed into action—cases were instituted against tenants on complaints by *biswedars*, additional police force was recruited[138] and the SPs ordered to keep notes ready on all leading agitators for preparing strong cases.[139]

Despite all such efforts, collection of *batai* continued to pose a serious problem.[140] A police conference, held at Patiala on 23 October and subsequent consultations between the IG and some nazims and SPs seem to have led to a change of tactics.[141] While continuing to take strong action to hold agitators at bay, the emphasis shifted to bringing about compromises between *biswedars* and tenants at the village level by means of pressurizing *biswedars* to be generous and not realize more than their due and urging tenants to respond by not encroaching on *biswedars*' rights.[142] The nazim of Barnala, who was probably the most successful exponent of this method, warned, however, that though the additional police was very helpful there would be trouble again if the report of the Enquiry Commission did not come by the next *batai* season, for *batai* had been effected this time by personally assuring tenants that the Commission was looking into the problem and that a decision[143] would come soon.

The government was not alone in its efforts to suppress the *Muzara* movement; it was encouraged by and received the full cooperation of the *biswedars*. The *biswedars* had been active as early as 1931, when the movement had first raised its head, assuring the Maharaja of their loyalty and

[135] Confidential letter No. 1515/C dated 27 September 1939 from the revenue minister, His Highness' government, Patiala to the prime minister, His Highness' government, Patiala enclosing notes of proceedings of the conference. File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar Movement in the Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.

[136] *Ibid*. The reference to "kisan" here is obviously to a movement led by Communists.

[137] Note by Maharaja Dhiraj Mohendra Bahadur, dated 5 October 1939, on the proceedings of the conference held on 26 September 1939. *Ibid*.

[138] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10 October 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

[139] Secret D.O. letter No. 6655/67-C dated 3 October 1939 from the IGP, Patiala to all SPs, Patiala State, *ibid*.

[140] CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 13 October 1939, 20 October 1939, *ibid*.

[141] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27 October 1939, *ibid*.

[142] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3 November 1939, 10 November 1939, *ibid*.

[143] *Ibid*.; Undated letter (probably written sometime in December) from the district nazim, Barnala to the revenue minister, His Highness' government, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar Movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.

offering to put their services at his command as well as taking measures to prevent the holding of meetings in which tenants' problems would be raised.[144] In 1938, when the movement threatened again, *biswedars* began to discuss the possibility of joint action against *muzaras*.[145] In the early part of 1939, when large-scale refusal of *batai* became common and tenants assumed an aggressive attitude, the Maharaja's government was bombarded with telegrams from *biswedars* of affected villages, asking for police help and protection on the plea that their life and property were in danger, and urging strong retaliatory action.[146] When the repressive policy swung into action, it elicited numerous congratulatory messages expressing the gratitude of *biswedars*.[147]

As the *muzara* movement assumed a more organized form and especially when it decided to go in for wider publicity and take a *jatha* to Simla, the *biswedars* were put on the alert. In June 1939, the "Landholders' Association" was formed at Patiala with the primary aim of safeguarding the interests of the landlords.[148] At its first meeting, two important resolutions were passed: one expressing landholders' strong disapproval of propaganda in a certain section of the press by the tenants and urging upon the public not to be led astray by it and the second offering their services to the government in combating the subversive activities of the misguided and mischievous people in the state.[149] The speakers at this meeting also said that they were prepared to give all kinds of facilities to tenants and redress all their grievances *provided the tenants agreed to pay batai*.[150]

Following the formation of this association, frequent meetings of *biswedars* were held to discuss the situation as it developed and to decide on forms of collective action. At one such meeting of *biswedars* of Barnala District held at Mansa Mandi on 25 June 1939, in which *biswedars* of affected villages were prominent,[151] Rs 100 was collected and a poster in gurmukhi, brought

[144] See footnote 39, in this chapter.

[145] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 12 August 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1547*.

[146] Telegrams to Maharaja from *biswedars* of Barnala District, 17 May 1939, from *biswedars* of Bhadaur dated 17 May 1939, from Harnarain Singh, Propaganda Secretary, Landlords Committee, dated 21 May 1939, from *biswedars* of Bhadaur dated 20 May 1939, from *biswedars* of Barnala District dated, 21 May 1939, from president, Zimindari Sabha, Barnala District dated 24 May 1939, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar Movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.

[147] *Ibid*.

[148] *The Tribune*, 20 June 1939.

[149] *Ibid*.

[150] *Ibid*.

[151] *Biswedars* of villages Kot Duna, Karamgarh, Talwandi Sabo, Chokerian, Nangal Khurd, Pharwahi, Dalelsinghwala and Gurthari were present. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 7 July 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

out by the propaganda secretary, Biswedari Committee, Patiala,[152] condemning the lies and rumours spread by selfish agitators was circulated.[153] Another meeting of nearly 30 *biswedars* from all over the state was held under the auspices of the Biswedari Committee at Bhatinda on 26 July 1939, to discuss the situation arising out of the appointment of the Enquiry Commission.[154] This meeting appointed a committee of five *biswedars* to fight the *biswedars'* case before the Commission and decided to collect Rs 2000 for this purpose.[155] It was also decided that copies of judgements and *pattas* that might be helpful in proving the *biswedars'* claim should be secured from the courts.[156] The Maharaja was to be urged to include the revenue minister among the members of the Commission and also appoint two counsels, one for the *biswedars* and the other for the *muzaras* for defending their case before the Commission.[157] Three days later, a dozen *biswedars* met at the house of an ex-minister, himself a *biswedar* and resolved that the activities of the *muzaras*, "who are carrying on a nefarious propaganda", should be stopped.[158]

Far from stopping, however, the movement for tenants' rights intensified and the *biswedars* grew desperate. The president of the Zamindari Sabha, Barnala District, wrote to the Maharaja informing him of meetings held by *muzaras* at which they criticized not only the *biswedars* but the Maharaja as well.[159] He went on to add that due to the "general economic depression and the behaviour of the tenants in depriving the *landlords of their share* of the produce, the condition of the landlords has become most miserable" and it will soon "become impossible for them to meet the State Revenue

[152] Biswedari Committee, Zamindar Committee, were the other names the Landlords Association was known by.

[153] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 7 July 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1555*.

[154] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 4 August 1939, *ibid*. *Biswedars* of villages Bhadaur, Karamgarh, Kot Duna, Talwandi Sabo, Kishangarh, Chinarthal, Qasaiwara Bhoondar, Mansa, Jeondan, Bangi Rugho and Chokerian, many of them mentioned in police reports at one time or another for being "bad" villages, attended this meeting. *Ibid*.

[155] *Ibid*.

[156] *Ibid*.

[157] *Ibid*.

[158] *Ibid*. Around this time, another poster published by a *biswedar* of Bhatinda and condemning the lawlessness of the *muzaras* was also circulated. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 31 July 1939, *ibid*.

[159] To quote: "Not only have they showered unlimited abuse on the Biswedars and all Revenue Officers from the lowest up to the Hon'ble Revenue Minister of your Highness' Government, but they have tried to throw mud on Your Highness' great and unsullied name as well". Letter from Balwant Singh, President, Zimindari Sabha, District Barnala to His Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mohinder Bahadur, Patiala, dated 28 August 1939, File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-Biswedar Movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.

and other dues".[160] He urged the Maharaja, in view of the approaching *kharif* harvest, to "issue further commands ... with instructions to all the Revenue and Police officers to carry out the provisions of Law and render all due and just assistance to both sides without favour or hesitation to maintain their existing rights".[161]

The *biswedars*' position continued to be precarious, however, and at the end of September the IG noted that it was becoming impossible for them to live in the villages any more.[162] A meeting of *biswedars* of Barnala District held on 19 October struck a similar despondent note.[163] One of the *biswedars* present, S. Chattar Singh of Kishangarh (one of the most stubborn villages) lamented: "When the tenants have become so courageous as to violate the orders of our gracious Master and the Police and the Revenue authorities do not take any action in this connection, there is no hope of our, Biswedars, receiving payment of Batai".[164] However, he added, the *biswedars* should not show any slackness in payment of land revenue whether they received *batai* or not.[165] The *biswedars* also decided at this meeting to continue to raise subscriptions for fighting their case before the Commission and to reach Patiala in a body to personally lay their grievances before the Maharaja.[166]

A rapid change appeared to have come about. A few months earlier *biswedars* were content to send telegrams from their villages complaining to the Maharaja and asking for protection; now they were no longer so sanguine and were even ready to emulate the *muzaras* and take a deputation to Patiala. The strength of the Muzara Movement had reduced the *biswedars* to a position where they felt they could no longer, as in the past, count on the automatic support of the state. They were also willing to give proof of their loyalty by continuing to pay land revenue while not receiving rent. The state was also forced, though it recognized the *biswedars* as a loyal element, to assume a position of mediator between the two contending parties and could no longer afford to be seen as synonymous with *biswedars*' interests.

[160] *Ibid*.

[161] *Ibid*. He also pointed out that the tenants had interpreted the appointment of the Enquiry Commission as "a triumph of their agitation" and further "that it means the stoppage of all Batai" till the Commission gives its decision. *Ibid*.

[162] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 29 September 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

[163] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 27 October 1939, *ibid*.

[164] *Ibid*.

[165] *Ibid*.

[166] *Ibid*. The secretary of the meeting Sardar Gurbakhshish Singh of Karamgarh, also read out a telegram received from the Maharaja expressing thanks for the offer of services in the war made by the Barnala *biswedars*. Obviously the biswedars were quick to take the opportunity of demarcating themselves from the tenants who had begun to talk of non-cooperation in the war effort.

The tenants, too, made further attempts to bring their problems to the notice of the state government as well as the resident. A number of them from Bhadaur and surrounding villages came to Patiala and submitted petitions to the prime minister.[167] A bigger demonstration was planned at Lahore under the inspiration of Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh (president, Patiala Kisan Committee), Ajmer Singh Tamkot and other *muzara* leaders. A batch of 30 *muzaras* collected at Budhlada in Hissar District (which had by now been well established as the centre of *muzara* activities) where Muni Lal Kalia, the Ludhiana Congress leader who had accompanied the Simla deputation as well, visited them and saw them off to Amritsar. The *jatha*, reaching Ferozepur by train, marched for three days before reaching Amritsar on 9 November 1939.[168] Now numbering about 70, this *jatha* held a *muzara jalsa* at Jallianwala Bagh, with Ajmer Singh Tamkot in the chair and Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Wazir Singh Daftriwala, Jagir Singh Phaguwalia and Pritam Singh Gujjran among those prominent in the audience.[169] Resolutions were passed requesting the Maharaja to expedite the report of the Enquiry Commission, to hold an enquiry into the conduct of state officials who had perpetrated atrocities on *muzaras* at the instance of *biswedars* and to help in resettling tenants of villages that had been the target of official and *biswedar* wrath which resulted in many of them having to leave their villages.[170]

After waiting in Amritsar for a few days, as the resident was out of town, the *jatha* went to Lahore. Its attempts to meet the resident were, however, thwarted by the imposition of Section 144 in the Civil Lines and the resident's refusal to meet any deputation before the Enquiry Commission submitted its report.[171] The *jatha* made some contact with Congress leaders and other members of the Opposition,[172] but on the whole "nobody in Lahore took much notice of it;"[173] and eventually it dispersed.[174]

Meanwhile, those tenants that had gathered at Patiala to meet the prime minister called in more of their compatriots from the villages and made attempts to see the Maharaja. They maintained that they had decided not to leave till the Maharaja met them in person and were planning to call their families including old men, women and children from the villages to join them. The Maharaja, however, was in no mood for an audience and

[167] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 15 November 1939, *ibid*.
[168] *Ibid*.
[169] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17 November 1939, *ibid*.
[170] *Ibid*. The villages mentioned in the resolution are Dharamgarh, Bir Khurd and Pharwahi.
[171] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 16 December 1939, *ibid*.; *The Tribune*, 29 November and 30 November, 1 December 1939; FR(2) November 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/11/39.
[172] *The Tribune*, 29 and 30 November 1939.
[173] FR(1) December 1939, *H.P.* F. 18/12/39.
[174] *Ibid*., Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 16 December 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

ultimately the tenants made a desperate bid to throw themselves before his car when he was on his way to a public function.[175]

The new policy of combining repression with conciliation at the village level had meanwhile begun to show results. Reports of increasing payment of *batai* began to slowly pour in[176] and, by the end of December 1939, it was claimed that about 80–85 per cent of *batai* had been effected.[177] The outstanding dues were from those that were "still absent from the State".[178] This referred to those tenants who had fled to British territory (mostly to Budhlada)[179] to escape the "show of force" that had gone hand in hand with "tact and other methods".[180] These exiled tenants, mostly from Barnala District, were also reported to have made armed forays into Patiala territory with the intention of attacking *biswedars* and loyalist tenants.[181]

However, with the virtual dying out of the resistance to the payment of *batai* in the majority of villages, the scene of *muzara* activities moved out of the state. The general secretary of the Muzara Committee called for a boycott of recruitment unless *batai* was abolished, a social boycott of those who pay *batai*, a revolt by tenants who were in jail and refusal to pay respect to officials.[182] A meeting of the Muzara Committee in which 40 people participated, including Harnam Singh Dharamgarh, Ajmer Singh Tamkot and Pritam Singh Gujjran, resolved that since the Enquiry Commission had done nothing so far, complaints in registered covers should be submitted to the Maharaja and the resident.[183] Other meetings held in Hissar and Karnal

[175] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17 November 1939, *ibid*. The nazim, Patiala, obviously vexed by the problem of controlling these tenants who wandered around Patiala town, remarked: "This evil must be nipped in the bud. The tenants have no justifications whatsoever to adopt coercive measures and harass the Government unnecessarily by resorting to *a kind of mass civil disobedience*.... If necessary measures are not adopted ... to stop the influx of these miscreants into Patiala city... these persons will be a constant source of nuisance to the Ministers and even His Highness" (emphasis added). *Ibid*.

[176] CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 3 November 1939, 17 November 1939, 24 November 1939, 1 December 1939, 8 December 1939, 15 December 1939, *ibid*.

[177] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 22 December 1939 and 4 January 1940 and CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 22 December 1939, *ibid*.

[178] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 22 December 1939, *ibid*.

[179] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 1 December 1939, *ibid*., letter dated 15 December 1939 from Darbara Singh, Propaganda Secretary, Kisan Committee with headquarters at Budhlada, district Hissar to the office of the All-India States People Conference, saying that thousands of tenants, leaving their families at the mercy of the police and *biswedars*, had fled the state to escape the merciless repression they were subjected to, which included raping of women in front of their parents, beating up of young boys, keeping stubborn tenants in unlawful detention in the villages, etc. *AISPC Papers*, File 139, Part I, 1937–42, folio 295–303.

[180] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 22 December 1939, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

[181] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 1 December 1939, *ibid*.

[182] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 22 December 1939, *ibid*.

[183] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 5 January 1940, *ibid*.

districts demanded abolition of *batai*, proper treatment to women arrested from village Dhan Singhkhana and early report by the Enquiry Commission.[184] A meeting at Budhlada decided that no "kankuts" be accepted till the Enquiry Commission gave its report and a *muzara jalsa* be held at the annual Hola fair at Anandpur in Hoshiarpur District.[185] The Punjab Kisan Committee, Amritsar, expressed its sympathy with the tenants and condemned the Maharaja for his collusion with *biswedars* and repression of tenants.[186] Narain Singh Bhadaur, Secretary, Muzara Committee, issued a poster urging the Maharaja to take a sympathetic decision on the *muzara* question.[187] The tenants of village Kishangarh came to Patiala with petitions addressed to the prime minister and the revenue minister complaining against the punitive police post and demanding an early decision on the Enquiry Commission's findings.[188] However, no immediate effect of all this activity was visible and the *batai* for *rabi* 1940, due in April and May, was collected with relative ease,[189] though only with the aid of the additional police force and the revenue staff, which moved from village to village.[190] There were a few cases of non-payment and these were left to the care of the courts.[191]

This sudden subsiding of the movement came about for a variety of reasons. The will to resist declined (except in some pockets) almost as sharply

[184] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 January 1940, Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 26 January 1940, *ibid*.

[185] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 1 March 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1564*.

[186] This meeting held on 28 February 1940, was attended by 35 of the 42 delegates of the Patiala Kisan Committee, among whom Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia and Darbara Singh were prominent. Bhagwan Singh Longowalia was elected cashier of the Punjab Kisan Committee and from the Patiala State Kisan Committee, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, Wariam Singh of Jaleldiwal, Dharam Singh of Dalelsinghwala, Jagir Singh of Joga (then in jail) were taken on the General Committee of the Punjab Kisan Committee. *Ibid*.

[187] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20 April 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1559*.

[188] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 25 March 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1564*.

[189] Confidential Weekly Reports from IGP, Patiala, dated 5 May 1940, 21 May 1940, 8 June 1940; CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 3 May 1940, 24 May 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1559*.

[190] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20 April 1940, 5 May 1940, 21 May 1940; 8 June 1940, *ibid*. Outlining the policy at the beginning of the *batai* season, the IG observed: "It is expected that a show of force, coupled with tactful methods which are to be adopted by the Police and Revenue authorities, will achieve the desired end... the Additional Police is being brought up to its full strength of 200, as during the next month or so the Police force will have to work under great pressure... for the tactful enforcement of Batai in a large and widespread area...." Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 20 April 1940, *ibid*.

[191] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 8 June 1940, *ibid*.

as it had risen. The success of the Simla deputation, coming at the height of the movement for non-payment of *batai* and resulting in the Maharaja's appointment of the Enquiry Commission, had strengthened the determination to fight for more in spite of heavy repression and raised hopes of an early settlement of the dispute. The change in policy on the part of the state from pure and simple repression to one of separating the political agitators and the more stubborn villages from the mass of the tenants and then crushing the former and conciliating and frightening the latter into submission, the slow pace of the working of the Enquiry Commission which dashed all hopes of quick success, the failure of the Lahore deputation—all these contributed to the inherent inability of the mass movement to sustain itself for a prolonged period of time, based as it was on a peasantry with relatively meagre resources ranged against the organized might of the *biswedars* and a state becoming increasingly adept at the subtler art of political manipulation while simultaneously willing to use all the force at its command.

A Lull Before the Storm: 1940–42

The fate of the *muzaras* was further sealed, though temporarily, by the large-scale arrests of the Punjab Socialists and Communists in June 1940 in consequence of their opposition to the war effort.[192] This cut off a crucial and vital link and source of support. Soon after, the Patiala police arrested Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh, the prominent leader of the Patiala Kisan Committee, when he was on a secret visit to the state.[193] With his arrest, the *muzara* workers who were moving around the state trying to whip up agitation were thrown into disarray.[194] The extent of inactivity was revealed when *muzara* prisoners, on their release from jail, found neither a big welcome nor a triumphant procession.[195] Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh's own conviction elicited not a whimper of protest.[196] Attempts by recently released *muzaras* to stir up some protest in Bhadaur met with a limited response.[197] There was even some talk of a march from Bhadaur to Patiala, but nothing appears to have materialized.[198] *Batai* payment in *kharif* 1940

[192] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 5 July 1940, *ibid*.
[193] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 12 July 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1565*.
[194] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 16 July 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1559*.
[195] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 July 1940, *ibid*.
[196] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 21 August 1940, *ibid*.
[197] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated, 2 October 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1561*.
[198] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 8, 9 October 1940, *ibid*.

was enforced without trouble, the only defaulters being those who had cases pending in court.[199]

There was a renewed attempt in the beginning of 1941 to start an agitation. The people mainly responsible for this were the Akalis Ujagar Singh Bhaura and Narain Singh Bhadaur, who belonged, at that time, to the Master Tara Singh group.[200] Taking advantage of the absence of socialist and "kisan" elements, this group made a bid to regain a foothold among the *muzaras*, which it had lost due to the more militant tactics adopted by the former and its own stand in favour of a constitutional path after the Maharaja had appointed the Enquiry Commission.[201] As a result of their new activities, Ujagar Singh and his associates drew towards them the more militant Akalis, such as Jagir Singh Phaguwalia and Wazir Singh Daftriwala,[202] who had, at the height of the *Muzara* Movement, when socialist influence was at its strongest, tended to come closer to the Praja Mandal group led by Jagir Singh Joga and the Patiala Kisan Committee whose president was Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh.[203] A symbol of the militant Akalis' attempt to establish their independence from the collaborationist and loyalist Akali Dal had been the setting up of the Malwa Riasti Akali Dal or States' Akali Dal.[204] Of this group, Pritam Singh Gujjran and Wazir Singh Daftriwala were by mid-1941 definitely won over to the side of the loyalist Akali *Jatha*, Patiala State.[205]

This polarization had occurred as a result also of the new position taken by the Akali Dal in national politics on the side of the British in supporting

[199] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3 January 1941, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1560*.

[200] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 14 February 1941, *ibid*. We emphasize "at that time" because keeping track of the rapid changes of alignments of Akali leaders is one of the most vexing problems encountered in the course of this study. Bhaura and Bhadaur, the two leaders mentioned here, later changed over: Bhaura went to the anti-Master Tara Singh and pro-Communist Akali group and Narain Singh Bhadaur was listed in 1943 as one of the Communist leaders.

[201] See above, pp. 260–61.

[202] Their change of stance, and their moving closer to the Master group, was becoming apparent by mid-1940, when they supported Master Tara Singh's candidature for Presidentship of Shahid Sikh Akali Conference to be held at Bhawanigarh. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 12 July 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1560*.

[203] See, pp. 260–61, especially footnote 120.

[204] *Ibid*.

[205] The Senior SP, CID, Patiala in his "note regarding Political Situation", said: "Kartar Singh Dewana, a member of this party (loyalist Akalis) has won over Pritam Singh of Gujjran and Wazir Singh of Daftriwala, Praja Mandal Akalis, in order to keep them back from identifying themselves with the Praja Mandal Movement by getting them to hold important offices of the Akali *Jatha*, Patiala State. Pritam Singh of Gujjran is the Vice-President of the Shiromani Akali Dal, Amritsar, and Wazir Singh of Daftriwala is the General Secretary of Akali *Jatha*, Patiala State." Note dated 7 May 1941, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1574*.

the war effort[206]—a position born out of the increasingly communal and therefore compromising tendency of the Shiromani Akali Dal. In this new situation, the Congress, the Praja Mandal and Communists were ranged on one side and the communal and pro-imperialist elements such as Akalis, Muslim League and Unionists on the other. The lines were drawn sharp and clear and for the first time the Akali workers and cadre at the lower levels were forced to take a clear position either with or against the Praja Mandal,[207] now completely dominated by secular nationalists and Socialists and Communists.[208]

Because of the peculiar conditions prevailing in Patiala, where open political activity had been virtually impossible, the Praja Mandal message had largely been spread through *dharmic* Akali *dewans*, which even the state could not prevent. Therefore, as Walia points out, in the minds of the masses, the Akalis were still identified with all their protest against oppression,[209] a task that had in reality been more effectively performed by secular Praja Mandal workers and by militant Akalis going against the directives of the Shiromani Akali Dal. Therefore, when the time came to clinch the issue, Master Tara Singh was able to draw towards him even those sections of Akalis who had in fact been contravening his policy in the states but who still retained their attachment for and belief in the Akali cause.[210] By now this "cause" was increasingly identified in terms of separate "Sikh" interests, leading to demands for more jobs for Sikhs, maintenance of the Sikh position in the army and finally a separate Sikh state and, in the case of the Sikh princely states, identification of Sikh interests with the interests of Sikh rulers. It is within this larger context of the clear polarization (born out of the logic of communal politics) between Akalis on one side and Praja Mandalists including Congressmen and Socialists on the other that the next important stage in the *Muzara* Movement can best be understood.

Between January and June 1941, Ujagar Singh Bhaura and Narain Singh Bhadaur organized a number of meetings in British territory at which protests against the delaying tactics adopted by the Maharaja were voiced and demands raised for making the report of the Enquiry Commission available to the public at an early date.[211] Speeches at these meetings also

[206] Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 155. Baldev Singh joined the Unionist ministry in Punjab and a Sikh Defence League was organized. *Ibid*.

[207] "An ordinary Praja Mandalist had never had the occasion to differentiate between the Congress and the Akali Party. Now Master Tara Singh's new policy was forcing him to make a choice". Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 156.

[208] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 26 April 1940, Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 19 June 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1559*.

[209] "For many the Akali Dal was a concrete historical reality, whereas the Praja Mandal was merely an abstraction". Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 156.

[210] *Ibid*.

[211] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 14 February 1941, 28 February 1941, 28 March 1941, 30 March 1941, 7 May 1941, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Files 1560 and 1574*.

referred to the atrocities committed on the *muzaras* by the subordinate officials, which had resulted in the desertion of many villages by the male population.[212] However, no call was given for non-payment of *batai* and the administration continued to enforce *batai* payment successfully.[213]

Though this activity did not lead to widespread non-payment of *batai*,[214] yet it was considered too serious to be ignored. The danger of the movement, pushed forward by its own momentum, getting out of the relatively "safe" hands of the present leaders or of the leaders becoming so powerful that they could use their strength against the state itself, thus destroying their usefulness to the administration which was based on their being *popular as well as loyal*, was recognized as early as 1939.[215] Therefore, when it seemed that these leaders were succeeding too well in carving out a niche for themselves in *muzara* politics,[216] the administration decided to strike and Ujagar Singh Bhaura and Narain Singh Bhadaur were arrested in British territory.[217]

Meanwhile, their attempts at political action combined with the new turn in national politics had succeeded in winning back an important part of the Akali cadre to the loyalist Akalis, thus forestalling a realignment of forces when the Socialists and Communists, after their release in 1942, resumed political activity. Such a combination could have posed a very serious threat indeed, for it would have brought together, in the *Muzara* Movement, a sizeable section of the militant Akalis with their popular image as steadfast fighters against oppression and the Socialists and Communists with their superior organization, commitment to the "kisan" cause and secular ideology. The presence of the Akalis in this combination would have made it difficult for the state to project itself as a champion of "Sikh" interests, which it did most successfully in later years with the active help and encouragement of Master Tara Singh and his communal Akalis.

This help came in various forms. The retirement of the non-Sikh prime minister was openly claimed as a success of the Akali agitation. The Maharaja was congratulated on the appointment of a Sikh prime minister[218] and

[212] *Ibid*.

[213] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, 4 July 1941, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1563*.

[214] Kishangarh and Dipgarh were the two villages that caused problems over payment of *batai*. Kishangarh *muzaras* attempted forcible seizure of land, whereas Dipgarh tenants ran away on hearing of police arrival so as to avoid paying *batai*. CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 20 June 1941, 27 June 1941 and 4 July 1941, *ibid*.

[215] See, pp. 260–61, especially footnote 117, this chapter.

[216] See CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 14 February 1941, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1560, 1574 and 1563*.

[217] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 13 June 1941, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1563*.

[218] Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 27 April 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1559*.

urged to have more Sikhs in his Cabinet for a "Sikh atmosphere" around him.[219] He was further told not to arrange the marriage of his sister in a non-Sikh family in deference to the feelings of his Sikh subjects and prohibit smoking in and around the palace area.[220] Other demands included 60 per cent reservation of jobs for Sikhs and the acceptance of Punjabi as the official language of the state.[221] The Maharaja was all too happy to make a few concessions of this nature, which helped in his staying on the right side of the Master Tara Singh group.

Master Tara Singh's increasing hold on the Patiala Akalis did not, however, go unchallenged. A rival group owing allegiance to Baba Kharak Singh sprang up and carried on a campaign seeking to expose Master Tara Singh's corruption, hypocrisy and superficial allegiance to Sikhism.[222] However, the propaganda of this group remained only at the level of defaming Master Tara Singh and did not attempt at building up an alternative base of support through serious participation in any movement. If anything, they tried to project themselves as more steadfast champions of "Sikh" interests and concentrated the brunt of their attack on the spurious Sikhism of the rival group[223]—a charge difficult to sustain for the Master Tara Singh group had gone as far as it was possible to go in demanding special rights for Sikhs.

Besides, the Master Tara Singh group was careful not to alienate the *muzaras* and kept up its image by occasional resolutions in favour of *muzaras*.[224] The presence of old *muzara* workers, Pritam Singh Gujjran and Wazir Singh Daftriwala, in the leadership of the Master Tara Singh group also helped to keep the *muzaras*' hopes of securing Akali support alive, for sometime at least. Also, the well-publicized rumour that Master Tara Singh had the ear of the Maharaja led at least some tenants to believe that he would be able to exert some pressure in their favour.[225] And the Akalis were also conscious that their position in the state and the goodwill of the Maharaja depended on their being able to render some service in keeping the Sikhs of the state out of the hands of more extreme political groups. That the state administration was willing to allow Akali activities among

[219] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3 July 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*.
[220] *Ibid*.
[221] *Ibid*.
[222] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17 July 1942, *ibid*.
[223] "It was openly declared that it was Master Tara Singh who had allowed the Sikhs to use caps and attend religious *dewans* wearing boots." *Ibid*.
[224] For example, of the 40-odd resolutions passed at an Akali *Dewan* (Master Tara Singh party) held on 27 June 1942, one stated that concessions be given to *muzaras* and the disputes settled amicably. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3 July 1942, *ibid*.
[225] An Akali Conference at Mansa was attended by many *muzaras* from Kishangarh and other villages and a resolution passed in their favour. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 24 July 1942, *ibid*.

the *muzaras* is clear from the following comment made in the margin of a Secret Abstract of Intelligence reporting such activities:[226]

> Master Tara Singh's party, in view of its past record, cannot be suspected (in regard to the Muzara agitation) of doing anything detrimental to the State. Their object must be to wean away peasants from communists who have just been liberated from the ban and must be trying to seize this opportunity of capturing the support of the masses. It is, therefore, with a view to detract the peasants from the lure of communists that the Akali party seems to have initiated its Amrit Parchar campaign. Therefore, *even if Akali contact with muzaras is an evil, it is a lesser evil* (emphasis added).

That the Akalis were fully aware of this and jealously guarded their position as the Maharaja's major allies, becomes clear from their wary reaction to the attempts of the Landlords' Association to reactivize itself towards the end of 1942. The possibility that this Association might, if it really took to active populist politics, emerge as a viable alternative ally of the state—an ally much more stable in that its very survival was tied up with that of the state (unlike the Akalis whose aim was to use the state to consolidate their own position in Punjab politics)—was viewed with grave apprehension by the Akalis.[227]

The anti-*biswedari* movement began meanwhile to return slowly to its feet. For, as the police reports showed, although the resistance to payment of *batai* had died out for some time, the *muzaras* remained "inimical at heart" to *biswedars*.[228] The activities of Ujagar Singh Bhaura and Narain Singh Bhadaur, in the first part of 1941, had helped keep the issue politically alive. The isolated but tough and continued resistance offered by some villages, especially Kishangarh,[229] also kept the banner flying. The absence of any

[226] Abstract dated 24 July 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 770*. This note is likely to have been made by either the IGP or the Maharaja.

[227] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 25 December 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*. The senior SP who reported this development, after noting that the Association had "started its work afresh", wrote that the Association was loyal to the government and the person of His Highness and that "keeping in view their position it cannot be suspected that the zamindars will oppose the administration at any time". He then added: "But I was surprised to learn that notwithstanding this, the Akali party (Master Tara Singh Party) sees the programme of the zamindars with suspicious eyes and believes that these people will oppose them which is, as far as my information goes, wrong. However, if the Akali party or any other party proves to be harmful to the Government ... these zamindars cannot be their friends, for their chief aim is to render loyal services to the Government and their benefit, too, lies in this *because of the fact that their existence depends on that of the State*" (emphasis added). *Ibid*.

[228] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2 August 1940, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1559*.

[229] See Files regarding Kishangarh Affairs, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1263, 1938, and 5804*.

sign of the appearance of the Enquiry Commission's report added to the impatience—this in spite of another deputation of five *muzaras* from Budhlada having visited Lahore in December 1941 and obtained an assurance from the secretary to the resident that a decision would be taken soon.[230] Soon after, in January 1942, there were reports from Kishangarh that, in the event of the discontinuance of the punitive police post there, the danger of the tenants taking forcible possession of land might well have to be faced.[231] Some other villages showed reluctance to pay *batai*.[232] Around the same time, the SP, Barnala, on his tour of the district, noticed a large number of illicit arms with the villagers and immediately ordered their confiscation on an emergency basis.[233] A few days later, on 25 January 1942, five *muzaras* went to Lahore from village Takhatpura in Ferozepore District to seek an interview with the resident. They were told that the resident was reaching Patiala on 7 February 1942, to settle their case.[234] Consequently, on 6 February, 50 *muzaras* collected in Patiala to meet the resident who, however, returned to Lahore without seeing them.[235] Some of them followed him to Lahore and were informed that he had spoken to the foreign minister, Patiala, and that the latter would now look into the matter.[236] Subsequently, amidst rumours that the *biswedari* system had been abolished in 27 villages, a deputation of five *muzara* agitators (including Dharam Singh Fakkar of Dalelsinghwala, a well-known Communist and "kisan" worker) was reported to be touring the Barnala and Sunam districts to raise money for the *muzara* agitation, and succeeding in causing a lot of worry to the local authorities.[237] In March, about a dozen *muzaras* tried to seek an interview with the Maharaja at Patiala, using the excuse of the birth of an heir to the throne, but to no avail. In utter desperation, they even tried to stop his car, but were successfully thwarted by the police.[238]

In this general mood of disappointment and impatience, the Muzara Committee held a meeting in village Jethuwal in Ludhiana District to decide on the future course of action.[239] It was resolved that *muzaras* refuse to pay *batai* till such time as the decision of the Enquiry Commission was made

[230] Confidential Weekly Reports, dated 5 December 1941 and 19 December 1941, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1563*.
[231] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2 January 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 763*.
[232] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 10 January 1942, *ibid*.
[233] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 24 January 1942, *ibid*.
[234] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3 February 1942, *ibid*.
[235] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 18 February 1942 and 15 February 1942, *ibid*.
[236] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 15 February 1942, *ibid*.
[237] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 21 February 1942 and 2 March 1942, *ibid*.
[238] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 21 March 1942, *ibid*.
[239] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17 April 1942 and 24 April 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Files 770 and 1573*.

public, the office of the Muzara Committee be shifted to Ludhiana District for better coordination, the accounts of the Committee be audited, *muzara* propaganda be carried on through the *Phulwari* weekly of Lahore and a deputation be sent to meet the prime minister of Patiala.[240] In practice, no deputation materialized, few *muzaras* withheld *batai* and there were few takers for Narain Singh Bhadaur's advice to *muzaras* to remove the corn from their barns surreptitiously.[241] This did not mean, however, that the tenants had either lost interest or hope. An Akali *dewan*, held by Master Tara Singh's party at Mansa in Patiala state, attracted a large number of *muzaras* who went to attend it while others sent contributions of grain in the hope that they could get support for their cause.[242] Their efforts did not go entirely waste, for the *dewan* did pass one resolution extending support to the *muzara* cause.[243]

Communists to the Fore: 1942–45

The situation in mid-1942 can be summed up best in the words of the superintendent of intelligence, Patiala:[244]

> The estrangement of relations of muzaras with Biswedars in the state has reached its climax. As the Muzaras form a very large number, although they are not well organised, every political party is after enlisting them in its own ranks in view of their large numerical strength. But as yet no political party has succeeded in enlisting them as a body.

He went on to add, however, that the "Kisan and Kirti Movements are their great favourites" and though these movements which "are identified with the communists ... could not grow stronger after communist leaders had been detained", now that "the Punjab Government have released eight communist leaders, Sohan Singh Josh and others, who have started reorganising the communist movement under the pretext of accelerating war efforts ... it is not an impossible thing that the Muzaras of the State may join this movement, as a body, sooner or later". The Superintendent's tour of Amritsar, Lahore and Tarn Taran also confirmed his assessment of the communist danger.[245] He pointed out that "at present there are two strong rival

[240] *Ibid*.
[241] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17 April 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*.
[242] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 24 July 1942, *ibid*.
[243] *Ibid.*
[244] Extract from CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 June 1942, under the heading "Muzara Movement", *ibid*.
[245] Confidential Note on Tour of Amritsar, Lahore and Tarn Taran from 8–12 June 1942, by Superintendent, Intelligence, Patiala, dated 24 June 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1577*.

political parties in the Punjab, Akalis and Communists... [and] the strength of the communists is larger than that of the Akalis... despite the fact that the Punjab Government had detained prominent communist leaders ... [and] the Shiromani Akali Dal has been making efforts at checkmating the advance of the Communist movement", and further that "in case the cooperation of the Communists with the Government continues and the rest of the communist leaders now in jail are released, the Communist party will get much stronger... [and] the communist movement may grow into the strongest one". He then went on to note that "the communist leaders have started reorganising communists in the right earnest ... and are holding jalsas in large numbers [hence] the Kisan and Kirti Movements are receiving a larger support [and] the Muzaras of the State, too, have received a sufficient backing". He concluded that this "may result in the intensification of the Muzara movement" and therefore "we must need work very cautiously with respect to this movement" for "the communists think it their duty to support the muzara movement".

Thus it appears that though "other political parties, too, Akalis, etc. [had] always shown and [were] out to show their sympathies [*sic*] towards the Muzaras' cause",[246] "the Kisan and Kirti Movements" were emerging as "their great favourites".[247] This process was helped by the virtual abandonment of the *muzaras* by the Akalis under Master Tara Singh, whose political position is best expressed in his query to an Akali Conference: "When Maharaja Patiala listens to us, why fight against him?"[248] The Akalis increasingly shifted their political base to the towns and the newly-emerging Sikh intelligentsia attracted by their demands for reservation of jobs and the like,[249] preferring to retain whatever rural support they could on the basis of their religious appeal rather than the more explosive issues raised by the class demands of the peasants, which were becoming incompatible with the greater necessity of the loyalist posture.

The impotency demonstrated by the *biswedars* who, after the initial spurt of activity in 1939, had been lulled into a false sense of security because of the temporary decline of the movement, also aided the re-emergence of the *Muzara* Movement. "The Government of His Highness", observed the superintendent of intelligence in June 1942,[250] "is receiving no help from the Biswedars in the matter of checking the Muzara Movement. So disorganised

[246] *Ibid.*

[247] Extract from CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 June 1942, under the heading "Muzara Movement" Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*.

[248] Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 156.

[249] *Ibid.*, p. 158. Master Tara Singh's own base in Punjab was in the towns; he was not a Jat but an Arora Sikh.

[250] Extract from the CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 June 1942, under the heading "Muzara Movement", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*.

they are that ... they cannot even manage their own household affairs". In his view "they have all the more been remiss in the discharge of their legitimate duties *because of the fact that their Batai is officially effected*", but this did not surprise him "because in fact they do not possess so much sense" that they could have used this "god send opportunity ... to stand upon their own legs". The reasons for this were that "a majority of them are illiterate... addicted to drinks and ... of loose morals. They have not been imparted such a training as may enable them to keep their *muzaras* under control". Apart from being incapable of handling the situation, "the *biswedars* do not take the *muzaras* as human beings and are out to exercise their full sway over them, legitimately or illegitimately and that, too, mostly through their inefficient 'Mukhtars'." Therefore, when "the system of carrying out Batai operations through the police ... is withdrawn, the Biswedars can enjoy no position". The situation was further complicated by the fact that "on the one hand, political bodies and communists in particular are trying to win over the Muzaras... [and], on the other, the Biswedars are not making any efforts at keeping the Muzaras under control".

The government, too, seemed to have exhausted all its political and ideological resources in that no new policy seemed to be emerging. While, as noted earlier, it was fully aware of the possibilities of a new outbreak, of the Communist efforts at rebuilding their base and their interest in the *muzara* cause,[251] the only policy that emerged was one that, apart from supporting communal forces under the Akalis, relied almost totally on repression. The Maharaja, with all his royal authority, commanded "that as a matter of policy outsiders should not be allowed to hold meetings in Patiala [and] the muzara agitation be dealt with a strong hand".[252] The inspector general of police, too, could not think beyond asking the superintendents of police "to collect information about the ringleaders" and contemplating action against them under the Defence of India Rules.[253] The SP, Barnala, also contributed to the collective wisdom: "so long as political parties continue to enter the state, there is not only the likelihood but certainty of the Muzara Movement assuming a very dangerous form".[254]

Only the superintendent of intelligence seemed to have grasped the significance of the various policy measures tried out in 1939, when the movement had first raised its head and drawn the right conclusions. His own recommendations were very similar to the line of policy followed with great

[251] See above pp. 277–78.

[252] Letter from Hari Sharma, Private Secretary to the Maharaja, to Colonel Sirdar Gurdial Singh Dhillon, Inspector General of Police, Patiala, dated 3 August 1942, conveying His Highness' orders, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 770*.

[253] Margin note by IGP on CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17 June 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*.

[254] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 27 July 1942, *ibid*.

success in late 1939—a policy that had combined conciliation at the level of the village between *biswedars* and *muzaras* with a wider policy of isolation and repression of political elements.[255] In his own words; "With a view to bind both the Biswedars and Muzaras down to stick to their respective rights, *it is very essential that they are administered full justice* and that, too, *by the shortest possible procedure*".[256] To facilitate this he recommended that "a Board of three Gazetted officers of the Judiciary, Police and Revenue, one each, be set up and a reasonable strength of the Additional Police force placed at its disposal. The Board be ordered to visit every Biswedari village, summon before it contending parties, pronounce its judgement in respect of their disputes, basing on facts and after satisfying them before responsible Village Panchayat officers and get it acted upon [at] the spot. False facts cannot stand before responsible officers and Panchayats on the spot.... Thus a decision of disputes pending for years will be expedited and the Muzaras will not stand in need of running to any other place." Showing a perception lacking among his colleagues, he emphasized that "the tendency of the said Board should be towards effecting an amicable settlement between Biswedars and Muzaras; for if a Muzara is rendered homeless,[257] he will naturally join a hostile agitation".

Commenting on the existing state of affairs, he lamented: "District authorities even are not using such tactics as are essential for patching up the strained relations between the Biswedars and the Muzaras except forcibly effecting Batai through police and revenue officials".[258] More cautiously, he chided the "higher authorities" for not "adopting such measures as may suppress the Muzara Movement". Finally, he pleaded: "It is the crying need of the hour that officers, exercising their influence, have the people satisfied in order to maintain law and order" and that "such a line is chalked out as may make the Muzaras pay Batai willingly to the Biswedars and lead a peaceful life". Needless to add, his appeal remained a cry in the wilderness, and His Royal Highness Shri 108 Maharaja Dhiraj Mahendra Bahadur's Government continued to stumble along its suicidal path.

The period after mid-1942 witnessed the gradual re-emergence of the *Muzara* Movement and the simultaneous consolidation of the Communist position within it.[259] Harnam Singh Dharamgarh, immediately on his

[255] See above, pp. 263 and 268.

[256] Extract from CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 June 1942, under the heading "Muzara Movement", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*.

[257] This is obviously a reference to those *muzaras* who had to flee their villages and homes to escape the tyranny of the police.

[258] Extract from CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 June 1942, under the heading "Muzara Movement", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*.

[259] A general meeting of the Punjab Kisan Committee was held on 13 August 1942, immediately after the Kisan school, at village Bhangali, Lahore District and was attended by all kisan

release, began to activise the *muzara* front. A meeting of Praja Mandal Akalis of Barnala Tehsil, over which he presided, passed resolutions asking the Maharaja to put a stop to the repressive policy of the state and publish the report of the Enquiry Commission.[260] An anti-fascist kisan conference was announced to be held at village Ugrahan in Sunam District, but the police, with the aid of the *biswedars*, secured an application from some residents of the village asking for the conference to be banned and issued notices to the organizers ordering them to refrain from holding it and threatening action under the Defence of India Rules.[261] The organizers protested by publishing posters (in gurmukhi) condemning the action of the *biswedars* and the police.[262] Simultaneously posters appealing to the Maharaja, the prime minister and the political agent against *biswedari* oppression were brought out by Dharam Singh "Fakkar" of Dalelsinghwala, secretary, Kisan Committee, Patiala State, and Ishar Singh of Tamkot, joint secretary, Kisan Muzara Committee, Patiala State.[263] Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh was reported to be using his contacts among sympathetic Akalis to circulate these posters.[264] The success of the Communists' efforts was reflected in the *jatha* of 40 *muzaras* that participated in the All-India Kisan Conference held at Bhakna in Lahore District from 12–14 April 1943.[265] This *jatha* went to Bhakna after collecting funds from the *muzaras* of the state, led by Dharam Singh "Fakkar", Ajmer Singh of Tamkot and Chand Singh of Bhadaur.[266] The president of the Reception Committee at Bhakna, in his welcome address, referred to the *biswedari* oppression in Patiala state.[267]

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workers present. It was decided "to revive and form new Kisan Committees in the Punjab States" and further to "form communist parties side by side the kisan committees in every district working under the instruction of the Punjab Communist Party". The superintendent of police, Incharge CID, who made this report also noted that "the said kisan or Muzara Committees are now working under the instructions of the Punjab Communist Party." Note dated 12 September 1943, on "Communist Movement in the State", submitted by the Superintendent of Police, Incharge CID, Patiala, File on 'Correspondence regarding Communist Movement in Patiala State', Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2226/100*.

[260] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 19 June 1942, *ibid*.

[261] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 28 August 1942, *ibid*. Note dated 12 September 1943, on "Communist Movement in the State", submitted by the superintendent of police, incharge CID, Patiala, File on "Correspondence regarding Communist Movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2226/100*. Another conference was planned at village Rar, but this was also banned and the organizers held it in village Chao in Ludhiana District and demanded early publication of the Enquiry Committee's report and equal distribution of land among peasants. *Ibid*.

[262] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 3 October 1942, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1573*.

[263] *Ibid*.

[264] *Ibid*.

[265] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9 April 1943, *ibid*.

[266] *Ibid*.

[267] *Ibid*.

The rapid increase in Communist influence was also explained by their simultaneous attempts to struggle against the loyalist Akalis led by Master Tara Singh. In this effort, they cooperated with the Akali group which had earlier formed the States' Akali Dal (and was consolidated under the name of the rival Akali *Jatha,* Patiala State) and which was unhappy over Master Tara Singh's collusion with the Patiala Maharaja and over the communal character of his politics. Communists participated in and were prominent in the *dharmic dewans* held by this group to condemn Master Tara Singh's anti-national and communal politics.[268] Jagir Singh Joga, a leading Communist of Patiala, made it clear that though, out of expediency, the Communists were then cooperating with the Government of India,[269] when the "proper time comes" they would "make it impossible for the Government to function and shall favour the kisans and *muzaras*".[270] He added: "Time will only show whether we—the Communists—or Master Tara Singh and his party have been leading the *panth* on the wrong path".[271] This projection of the Communists as the militant upholders of the Akali tradition of relentless struggle against oppression—of therefore being "better Akalis"—was valuable ideologically in mobilizing the *muzaras*. The Communist plan of holding counter-meetings wherever the Master Tara Singh party held its conferences was reported to have seriously disturbed the Master Tara Singh party and forced it to lie low[272] as it was suffering serious inroads into its popularity.[273]

Throughout 1943 and 1944, the Communist workers kept up a hectic pace of propaganda and mobilization of *muzaras*. The Patiala Kisan Committee organized a number of conferences, launched a membership drive and district tours were undertaken by its leaders and workers.[274] As a

[268] CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 13 March 1943 and 2 July 1943, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. 565/C of 2000 (1943–44).*

[269] "Expediency" here obviously refers to the necessity to take the side of the Allies once the Soviet Union was attacked by Hitler. Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. 565/C of 2000 (1943–44).*

[270] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 23 April 1943, *ibid*.

[271] *Ibid*.

[272] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 24 September 1943, *ibid*.

[273] A secret agent from Lahore reported: "There is no programme at present for any mass conference or action in the Malwa or in any of the States, for the Akalis are growing conscious of their increasing unpopularity. The masses are not with them.... There is no programme and no possibility of direct action anywhere, and none in Patiala…. I have met leaders of parties hostile to the Akalis. As soon as the Akalis start a *morcha* anywhere, they will strongly oppose them. These parties are (1) Progressive Akali Party led by Durlab Singh, (2) Servants of Sikhs Society led by Kartar Singh of Campbellpur, Advocate, Lahore, (3) The Communist Party. These are the strongest amongst their opponents". CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 4 June 1943, *ibid*.

[274] CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 9 July 1943, 23 July 1943, 20 August 1943, 24 September 1943, 29 October 1943, 26 November 1943, 10 December 1943, 2 June 1943, 9 June

result, the district authorities began to experience difficulty in the realization of *batai* from tenants,[275] though as yet there was no large-scale refusal to pay. Propaganda through ostensibly religious *dewans* also continued,[276] though increasingly the ascendancy of Communists was becoming clear and the administration referred to all such meetings as "communist conferences".[277] A deputation of the Kisan Committee met various officials including the prime minister and the IGP to press for a solution to the *muzara* problem.[278] By July 1944, the Patiala authorities were seriously worried about the "daily increase" in Communist influence on the *muzaras* and thought that it could only be checked by the settlement of the *muzara-biswedar* dispute.[279]

Despite attempts to ban meetings and conferences, the campaign continued, and the high point was reached with the holding of the Fourth Patiala Kisan Conference at Tungwali in Ferozepore District on 6–7 September 1944.[280] Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh was in the chair, and the conference was attended by Achhar Singh Chhina, President, Punjab Kisan Committee, Jagir Singh Joga, the Patiala Communist leader, Ajmer Singh Tamkot, Ishar Singh of Tamkot, Chand Singh of Bhadaur, Ghuman Singh of Ugrahan and other Communist and *muzara* leaders.[281] *Muzara* demands were voiced by almost every speaker at the conference including Achhar Singh Chhina who said that he had been assured by the prime minister that they would be allowed to hold their conferences inside the state, but obviously the prime minister had gone back on his promise since the banning of meetings continued. He added that they (the Communists) were in favour of abolition

1944, 30 June 1944, 28 July 1943, 7 July 1944, 11 August 1944, 18 August 1944, 25 August 1944, 1 September 1944, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. 565/C of 2000(1943–44), and CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944–45).*

275 CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 4 June 1943 and 14 January 1944, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. 565/C of 2000 (1943–44).*

276 CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 13 March 1943 and 2 June 1944, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No.565/C of 2000 (1943–44) and CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944–45).*

277 From about mid-1943, this term became increasingly common when reference was made to *muzara* activities or other Communist organized meetings.

278 CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2 July 1944, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944–45).*

279 Superintendent of Intelligence, Patiala's note on the Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 7 July 1944, *ibid*. The note further said: "The programme which communist party propagates amongst the *muzaras* appeals [to] the latter very much and the result is that they [Muzaras] have alliance with the communist party. No effective measures are being adopted in the direction of preventing the propaganda carried [on] by the communists in the state. They are therefore having an opportunity of strengthening their movement... when they intend holding conferences in the state, it is banned... but the propaganda that they do individually and surreptitiously cannot be lawfully checked."

280 CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 8 September 1944, *ibid*.

281 *Ibid*.

of all *biswedari* and *jagirdari* rights and not merely in Patiala State. He called upon the kisans to organize, for the time was about to come when *jathas* of kisans would march from the villages and occupy the Moti Mahal (the palace of the Maharaja of Patiala) and a government of peasants and workers would be formed.[282] Other speakers condemned the repressive policy of the Patiala State, the confiscation of the property of Communist workers, the lack of civil liberties, the backward condition of educational facilities in the state, etc.[283] The Akali collusion with the Maharaja also came under heavy fire and the State was criticized for allowing the holding of Akali Conferences while imposing a ban on kisan meetings.[284] The Communist attitude towards the Akalis was stated succinctly by one speaker, "We want that the Akalis should exist but they should be like Akali Phula Singh who punished even Maharaja Ranjit Singh and not like the present-day Akalis".[285] A more contemporary example given was that of Sewa Singh Thikriwala who starved himself to death in a Patiala prison, unlike Master Tara Singh who sold himself to the Maharaja of Patiala.

The self-confidence of the Patiala Communists was expressed at Tungwali in the demand for the recognition of kisan and Communist organizations and student unions.[286] This confidence grew out of the support that they had received from the *muzaras*—liberal contributions of grain and money were reported to have been made by the *muzaras* for the Tungwali Conference.[287] That this confidence was not without basis was soon proved again by the popular response to the *bhog* ceremony held to perform the last rites of Bhagwan Singh Longowalia at village Longowal on 5 October 1944.[288] Kisan Sabhas of various villages and tahsils in Patiala, as well as of other states, sent deputations and contributed money.[289] Also, significantly, each one of them presented a red flag in honour of the dead comrade.[290] Achhar Singh Chhina and Jagir Singh Joga were the prominent leaders present and the former made a speech in which he lauded Bhagwan Singh Longowalia's contribution to the Akali, Praja Mandal, Congress and Kisan Sabha movements.[291]

It is obvious from this account of the open participation of Kisan Sabhas and presentation of red flags that the Communists were increasingly becoming bolder and coming into the open. Meetings in villages were held in

[282] *Ibid*.
[283] *Ibid*.
[284] *Ibid*.
[285] *Ibid*.
[286] *Ibid*.
[287] CID Secret Abstract of intelligence, dated 15 September 1944, *ibid*.
[288] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 6 October 1944, *ibid*.
[289] *Ibid*.
[290] *Ibid*.
[291] *Ibid*.

open defiance of the law and speeches made which in the view of the state authorities were highly objectionable.[292] This boldness was visible among the *muzaras* as well—50 of them from the villages of Dipgarh and Bhadaur met the prime minister in Patiala to seek information about the decision of the Enquiry Commission and warned him that if, on their return to their villages, they were harassed by the police, they would be back right away.[293] The big show of strength was, however, made in February 1945 when 4,000 *muzaras* collected in Patiala to meet the prime minister.[294] They maintained that the earlier group of 50 had been told by the prime minister to wait for one month and therefore, now that one month had lapsed, they had come to see him.[295] On being asked as to why they had come in such large numbers when a few representatives could have easily stated their case, they replied that "they understand that the biswedars have told His Highness and the Prime Minister that only some handful of mischievous tenants are creating trouble, ... so to impress the Government about their unity and solidarity in this cause they have come in numbers".[296] They were persuaded to leave Patiala on the assurance that a decision would soon be made and intimated to them.[297]

The *biswedars* of Patiala were reported to be extremely perturbed over the recent developments and feared that a decision favourable to the *muzaras* would be taken by the state.[298] The seeming inability of the state to tackle the increasing strength of the movement made them justifiably nervous, as also the fact that the *muzaras* and their representatives appeared to be securing interviews with high officials with considerable ease. The *biswedars* warned that a pro-*muzara* decision would not only ruin them but would be equally harmful to the state in the long run because "the muzara movement... forms a part and parcel of the Kisan party in the British Punjab which is essentially communistic in character". They feared, too, that in the event of *muzara* success the loyalty of "some of the weak-minded Biswedars" may waver, and they may "join them in their nefarious activities"—a state of affairs that "would surely bring about a big communist movement in the state resulting in serious consequences for the administration".[299] Another argument offered, in fact a thinly-veiled threat, was that such a decision during the war would hamper the efficient prosecution of the war effort.[300]

[292] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 27 October 1944, and 26 January 1945, *ibid*.
[293] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 12 January 1945, *ibid*.
[294] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9 February 1945, *ibid*. Some of the villages from which these tenants came were Kishangarh, Kot Duna, Bhadaur, Damdama Sahib, Dipgarh, Qasiawara, Mayiwal, Chanarthal, Kalbanhara, Talwandi Sabo, Dhakansuwala and Jangiana. *Ibid*.
[295] *Ibid*.
[296] *Ibid*.
[297] *Ibid*.
[298] *Ibid*.
[299] *Ibid*.
[300] *Ibid*.

To finally clinch the issue, they gave the example of British Punjab where the same tenancy law was in operation and no concessions were being made to tenants and wondered why Patiala wanted to take the lead in this matter.[301] Obviously apprehensive, the *biswedars*, thinking of all possible arguments which might appeal to the administration, sought to avert a decision which would cut at the very roots of their existence.

Meanwhile the *muzaras*, under the direction of the kisan and Communist organizations, stepped up their agitation. The Patiala Kisan Committee called on the tenants to remain firm in their resolve as very soon they would be able to do away with the *biswedari* system.[302] Reports of non-payment of *batai* began to come in;[303] and by March the nazim of Patiala reported that "the tenants' agitation has begun in full swing".[304] *Biswedars* began to send in reports of tenants' refusal to yield *batai* and of evil intentions of seizure of land.[305] Rumours were afoot that land was already being forcibly occupied in some parts of the state.[306]

A series of meetings was held and many posters circulated.[307] The Communist-influenced Malwa Riasti Akali Dal (described in government files as just another name assumed by the Patiala Kisan Committee and Communist Party)[308] was active.[309] A *dharmic dewan* was held in Nabha State

[301] *Ibid*.
[302] CID Secret Abstract of intelligence, dated 2 March 1945, *ibid*.
[303] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2 March 1945 and 9 March 1945, *ibid*.
[304] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 9 March 1945, *ibid*. The Nazim added: "They (the tenants) are feeling very much encouraged by the belief that the government is showing communistic tendencies and are yielding ground to the agitators against the law abiding, peaceful section of the public.... The tenants are said to be collecting funds and arms to use according to their sweet will.... The landlords on the other hand are feeling shaky...." *Ibid*.
[305] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 2 March 1945, *ibid*.
[306] *Ibid*.
[307] CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 2 February 1945, 16 February 1945, 9 March 1945, 16 March 1945, 23 March 1945, 25 May 1945, 29 June 1945, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case Nos, CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944–45) and 2002 (1945–46)*.
[308] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, 12 January 1945, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2001 (1944–45)*. Elaborating on the relationship between these groups, the Abstract continued: "The political parties mentioned at Nos. 2, 3 and 4 [namely (1) The other Akali *jatha*, Patiala State also known as Ridha Singh of Ghagga party (2) Communist Party which is known by the name of Jagir Singh of Joga Party (3) The Patiala Kisan Committee which has got its other name as the Muzara Committee and is known by the name of Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh party] are in fact different names assumed by one and the same party which they have done to influence the general public and to make their task of propaganda easy at different situations with different kind of audience i.e., they hold *dewans* at religious places and name themselves as the Akali *jatha* while in the gathering of Kisans they name themselves as the Kisan and Muzara Committee. In the Gurdwaras the Ridha Singh party hold *dewans*... and usually all the speakers of their three parties gather and deliver speeches.... These three political parties are hostile towards the Patiala Government". *Ibid*.
[309] The Dal, at its conference held at Pahewa Fair from 11–13 March 1945 and attended by about 2,000, demanded recognition of Kisan Committees and "showered rebuke" on Master Tara Singh. CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16 March 1945, *ibid*.

attended by about 7,000 people and addressed mainly by kisan workers and leaders including B.P.L. Bedi, a prominent Socialist of Punjab, Harnam Singh of Dharamgarh and Jagir Singh Joga, in which *muzara* demands were raised and Akalis criticized. Increasing hostility between the Akalis and Communists was in evidence and the Akalis were definitely on the defensive.[310] Harnam Singh Dharamgarh was touring the rural areas and telling the *muzaras* that the Maharaja was showing signs of weakening as a result of their campaign and that the Communists would continue to gather more strength.[311] By June 1945, non-payment of *batai* had become widespread and this was clearly seen to be a result of the efforts of kisan workers.[312]

The gravity of the situation became certain when, for the first time in all these years, the Maharaja decided to hold a durbar at Bhadaur, one of the worst affected areas. The durbar, held on 13 June 1945, was attended by many and *muzaras* and *biswedars* were given a patient hearing and advised to arrive at a mutual settlement of their disputes.[313] It seems, however, to have had little effect in the desired direction and served, if anything, as evidence of the weakness of the state in the face of the *muzara* upsurge.

The movement intensified rapidly and developed into a confrontation between *muzaras* and the police. In Kot Duna, the tenants refused to pay *batai* in spite of the insistence of the tahsildar and the police, walked out of the joint meeting of *muzaras* and *biswedars* called by the district authorities and, arriving in Patiala in a body of 50, lodged a complaint against the tehsil staff and the police and tried to meet the Inspector General of Police.[314] A violent clash took place at Bhadaur between the *biswedars* and the *muzaras*, and the *muzaras* promptly marched off to Patiala to complain to the authorities but, not getting a sympathetic response, immediately proceeded to Simla.[315] In village Dharamgarh, the tenants began to forcibly take possession of land. To escape retaliation by the police many of them fled the village but their women and children were reported to be harassing the police.[316] Gurbuxpura and Dasondhasinghwala were also reported to be unduly "stubborn" villages. In the former, the police guard was attacked in order to release from custody one person who had been arrested in connection with a case.[317] A *jatha* of tenants of village Dharamgarh, under the leadership of Harnam Singh, marched to village Ugrahan, red flags in hand and was welcomed by the villagers and hosted for the night.

[310] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 23 March 1945, *ibid*.
[311] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 16 March 1945, *ibid*.
[312] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 15 June 1945, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2002 (1945–46)*.
[313] *Ibid*.
[314] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 18 May 1945, *ibid*.
[315] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 8 June 1945, *ibid*.
[316] *Ibid*.
[317] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 29 June 1945, *ibid*.

This *jatha* was on its way to the big Kisan Conference being held at village Mauran in Jind State.[318]

Summing up the situation at the end of June, a sub-inspector of the CID, (political branch) remarked, "The relations between biswedars and muzaras are becoming more and more strained. The Muzaras have organized themselves to fight for their claims, for which they are also collecting funds. They say, rather openly challenge not only the Biswedars but also the authorities, that they will kill or will be killed but would not give Batai".[319] Quoting recent incidents of clashes between the police and *muzaras*, he added that this "shows that they are now preparing themselves to take up arms against the police". The situation, in his view, would soon get completely out of control "if the flames of such like propaganda are spread in all other muzara villages". *Biswedars*, too, took an equally serious view of the agitation and at a meeting held on 28 June appealed to the Maharaja to take strong action against the *muzaras*, order the eviction of those who refuse *batai*, restore the seized lands to the *biswedars*, continue collection of *batai* through state agencies, stop the withdrawal of cases against *muzaras* and protect the *biswedars* from the "excesses" of the *muzaras*. They also resolved to take a deputation to acquaint the Maharaja with their difficulties. The general tone of the meeting reflected a feeling that they were being abandoned by the state and left at the mercy of the *muzaras*.[320]

The huge Kisan Conference held at village Mauran in the state of Jind in late June was reported to have "greatly excited... the feelings of the tenants... against landlords [and] ... added to their impudence", as well as "very adversely affected the prestige of His Highness ... and the Patiala Government in the eyes of the public".[321] Further, this conference had an "equally adverse effect ... on the Akali movement in the States. It is feared that if two or three more such successful conferences of communists were held, the Akali Movement would totally die out in the States. The impression that the Akalis are the hired agents of Princes to strengthen their (Princes') hold on them and that the kisan workers are their real well-wishers is gradually gaining ground in the minds of the people".[322]

To counter the influence of the Communists, the Akalis decided to organize a special "Dhadi *jatha*" to tour the villages of the Patiala, Nabha and Jind states and carry out pro-Akali and anti-Communist propaganda.[323] However, "the

[318] *Ibid*.

[319] *Ibid*.

[320] *Ibid*.

[321] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, 16 July 1945, *ibid*.

[322] *Ibid*.

[323] *Ibid*. "Dhadi *jatha*" is the name given to a group of singers who sing the glory of the Sikh past and extol the sacrifices of heroes of yore. Propaganda through this *jatha* was always very useful, for its emphasis was on touching the emotional and sentimental chord in the listener. This form is used to this day by the Akalis.

effect of communists [was] so deep on the public mind", that the Akali *jatha* of Jind wrote to the Akali Dal at Amritsar that this special *jatha* "would not be able to remove that effect; and that at least one good speaker who could effectively oppose the communists outright should also accompany the said *Jatha*".[324] Their fears were well founded, for on reaching Mauran, the venue of the recent kisan conference, the "dhadi *jatha*" discovered to its dismay that "the hold of the communists was so strong over the minds of the villagers ... that nobody cared to hear their propaganda songs ... and preaching against the Communists".[325] Meanwhile, their difficulties increased, as the Communists decided to follow the *jatha* in the different villages of the Phulkian states.[326]

Another very important kisan conference was held at Shehna in Ludhiana District on 7, 8 July 1945, at which the chief slogan raised was "Stop batai system" and the audience of 700, mostly *muzaras*, assured of the Kisan Committee's support. Here, too, red flags were in abundance and the *muzaras* were exhorted to do away with the *biswedari* system as the Russian *muzaras* had done in 1917. The organized looting of the *muzaras* by the state officials and *biswedars* was condemned and Achhar Singh Chhina, ridiculing the Maharaja's claim at Bhadaur that he was a "Divine Ruler" and God spoke through him, said that God had spoken to the muzaras also and asked them to stop paying *batai*.[327] The cumulative effect of these conferences and the numerous small village meetings was soon felt.

The *muzaras*' attitude grew more defiant and a serious clash occurred on 7 July 1945, at village Dhandoli Khurd in Sunam District when the police party arrived to execute the orders of the district magistrate to restore some land to the *biswedar*. The *muzaras* attacked the police and revenue officials, the police fired in return and two tenants were killed.[328] Tenants of Bakshiwala started taking forcible possession of *biswedars*' lands.[329] About 60 tenants of different villages of Patiala saw the Maharaja and complained to him about the maltreatment they suffered at the hands of the *biswedars*. His Highness was reported to have listened to them patiently and promised them a fair deal.[330] The *biswedar* of village Dasaundhasinghwala wrote to the secretary of the Zamindar Sabha, Patiala, to say that the *muzaras* had belaboured him with *lathis* and *gandasis* and damaged his

[324] *Ibid*.
[325] *Ibid*.
[326] *Ibid*.
[327] Confidential Report on Proceedings of Kisan Conference held at Village Shehna, Ludhiana district, on the 7, 8 July 1945. File on "Correspondence regarding Anti-biswedar movement in Patiala State", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2077*.
[328] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 13 July 1945, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2002 (1945–46)*.
[329] *Ibid*.
[330] Fortnightly Report of IGP, Patiala, dated 15 July 1945, *ibid*.

crops.[331] The inspector general in his report noted that "the tenants appeared to be determined not to give Batai to the Biswedars".[332]

But the most telling reaction was that of the *biswedars* themselves. A meeting was held on 14 August at Patiala which was attended by prominent *biswedars* from all over the state, especially those belonging to the affected villages. The general tenor of the speeches indicated "a growing disappointment among them on account of the unsympathetic attitude of the Patiala Government". The meeting started off with the president reviewing the general position of the *biswedars* in the various villages of the state and expressing concern over the daily "dacoities" occurring in the rural areas. "It appeared", he said, "as if a revolt had taken place". He went on to report that he along with some *biswedars* had interviewed the Maharaja and offered him their lands on payment of reasonable compensation, but the Maharaja, in spite of their conciliatory attitude, had been unsympathetic. Another *biswedar* present stated that, though the *muzaras* had free access to the Maharaja (and even then tenants of 200 villages were on their way to see him), the *biswedars*' requests for an audience were ignored. He railed: "You will continue receiving kicks if you continue in your submissive attitude.... If our due demands are not considered sympathetically here, let us go to Simla. Meet the Resident. See the Viceroy.... Here you will have only insults". The *biswedars* were very critical of the Prime Minister, Hardit Singh Malik, who they thought was responsible for encouraging the *muzaras*. They also felt that the durbar at Bhadaur "was not the result of a wise counsel" and had lowered the Maharaja's prestige.[333]

So nervous had the *biswedars* become, and so disillusioned were they with the government, that a really desperate path was suggested as the only way out. The secretary of the meeting, Sirdar Nirpal Singh of Bhadaur, proposed that "all the members (of the Zamindar Sabha) make it a point to get enlisted 15 young men each for the *Jatha* to be called as Drolli *Jatha*... they should be good *lathi* fighters and always ready to respond to the call of the Zamindar Sabha.... It does not matter whether such young men are drawn from among the sweepers or chamars ... we require good stalwart youth.... Their names should be kept secret ... they would be expected to be on duty for all the 24 hours". The object of these *jathas* was simple; "Just as

331 CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 27 July 1945, *Ibid*.

332 Fortnightly Report of IGP, Patiala, dated 15 July 1945, *ibid*.

333 CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 17 August 1945, *ibid*. Another suggestion made was that Bhulabhai Desai, who was coming to Patiala soon, be given a big reception and his advice sought. (It was also mentioned that he charged Rs 2000 for an hour's lecture.) From this it appears that the *biswedars* were feeling the necessity of securing support from right-wing elements outside the state and that they realized that, given the fast developing political situation in the country as a whole, their problems were not likely to remain within the confines of Patiala alone.

the tenants are organizing attacks on us similarly we should also attack them".[334]

The implications of this course of action were not lost on the state administration and the Maharaja reacted with promptness to stem this challenge to the authority of his government. He ordered that the president of the Zamindar Sabha be warned severely against the organization of the so-called 'drolli *jathas*' as this would not be tolerated and those responsible would be severely dealt with under the law.[335] Clearly, the *biswedars* had gone too far and no government worth its name could openly countenance such a direct contravention of the law. The price demanded by the *biswedars* for their loyalty was one which the government could no longer afford and when they threatened to take the law into their own hands, it had to intervene and make it clear that they were, after all, only the subjects of the state.

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The movement hereafter rapidly escalated into an open confrontation between the *muzaras* and the *biswedars*, with the state intervening mainly to institute cases of non-payment of *batai* and criminal assault.[336] Numerous armed clashes took place at different places, some over forcible possession of land, others over forcible realisation of *batai*.[337] At village Gobindgarh, the *biswedar* Captain Jaswant Singh Jeji opened fire on his tenants, killing one and injuring seven. *Biswedars* in their turn sent in a barrage of complaints alleging that they and their families were being attacked in the villages by the tenants.[338] Undeterred, the *muzaras* continued with their refusal to pay *batai* and increasingly more and more land was forcibly occupied.

[334] This account of the proceedings of the *biswedars'* meeting was initially omitted by Sardar Birdevinder Singh, the Superintendent Intelligence, from the Secret Abstract of Intelligence, obviously in an attempt to protect the *biswedars* from the Maharaja's wrath. It came to light, however, and the Prime Minister asked the IG Police to call for an explanation. This incident brings out the nature of the support the *biswedars* received from certain officials. Prime Minister's Office No. 238/SPC dated Delhi, 16 September 1945, *ibid*.

[335] *Ibid*.

[336] CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 8 June 1945, 13 July 1945, end of August 1945 etc., *ibid*.

[337] Reports sent by biswedars to the Government, dated 1 June 1945, 17 July 1945, 28 July 1945, 3 December 1945, 22 December 1945, 22 February 1946, 28 August 1946, 8 October 1946, 12 October 1946, 1 November 1946, 6 November 1946, 22 November 1946, 16 December 1946, File on "Landlords Association, Patiala", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. T-I-of 2001 (1945)*.

[338] *Ibid*. In their own meetings, they also passed resolutions asking the prime minister to order the police to recover unauthorized arms from the villages and take steps to ensure *batai*, started a relief fund to fight the cases of *bisweedars* and the "oppression of communists and tenants" and decided to form an executive committee and sub-committees in districts and tehsils to

The Communists continued to be in the lead of this movement, carrying on propaganda, holding meetings in villages where clashes took place, organizing armed guards to protect the seized lands, demonstrating their solidarity at various conferences, sending petitions, organizing deputations, arranging for the defence of tenants involved in court cases, touring the villages and enlisting members and collecting funds.[339] A Muzara War Council was set up in 1945 itself, consisting of 21 members, mainly Communists, to coordinate the movement.[340] The Praja Mandal in its conference held at Patiala on 5, 6 October 1946, which was attended by 60,000 people, under the influence of Brish Bhan, the Praja Mandal leader sympathetic to the communists and the tenants' cause, passed a resolution asking for the abolition of the biswedari system and raising of occupancy tenants to the status of proprietors.[341] This support certainly gave strength to the tenants as the Praja Mandal had the weight of the Congress behind it.

By the beginning of 1947, the general secretary of the Zamindar Sabha was warning the government that, if the *muzaras* were left unchecked in their lawlessness for six months more, "there will be an open revolution throughout the State like France".[342] The Maharaja responded with a royal Proclamation announcing, on 11 March 1947, a sweeping partition of lands between tenants and *biswedars*, thus establishing the tenants' rights of proprietorship to only a portion of the lands.[343] This solution was rejected by the *muzaras* but it indirectly strengthened their claim to ownership of land.[344] For the time being, however, the proclamation was kept in abeyance,[345]

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prepare for the forthcoming Patiala Assembly elections; however, those *biswedars* who were considered to be pro-muzara or Communist were to be barred from membership. *Ibid*., CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence, dated 8 February 1946, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2002 (1945–46)*.

339 CID Secret Abstracts of Intelligence, dated 27 July 1945, 25 August 1945, 21 September 1945, 23 November 1945, 22 February 1946, 22 March 1946, 29 March 1946, 5 April 1946, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. CB-I-2 of 2002 (1945–46)*; Reports sent in by the biswedars to government, dated 22 February 1946, 1 February 1947, etc. "File on 'Landlords" Association, Patiala', Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. T-I-of 2001 (1945)*.

340 Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 163; PUC II letter dated 1 February 1947 from the secretary of the Zamindara Sabha, reporting proceedings of Dalelsinghwala Muzara Conference at which an appeal was made for collecting Rs 500,000 required by Muzara War Council to form a powerful union against the *biswedars* and state police. File on "Landlords' Association, Patiala", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. T-I-of 2001 (1945)*.

341 Note on "Tenants Problem in Patiala State" submitted by All-India States' People Conference, Patiala State, *AISPC Papers, File No. 133A, 1945–48*.

342 Letter dated 13 January 1947, File on "Landlords' Association, Patiala", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. T-I-of 2001 (1945)*.

343 Memorandum submitted by the Patiala State Praja Mandal to the prime minister and the states ministry, Government of India, *AISPC Papers, File 133, Part I, 1948 (Patiala State)*.

344 *Ibid*.

345 *Ibid*.

and clashes between *biswedars* and *muzaras* continued as before, with the administration virtually adopting a policy of *laissez faire* between tenants and landlords.[346]

Outside Patiala, however, events were moving at a rapid pace and soon acquired proportions too large for the state to remain unaffected. With the coming of Independence in August 1947, the Praja Mandal became more aggressive and demanded immediate responsible government in the states.[347] The Akalis, who only a couple of months ago had declared Patiala as "the only Sikh State where Sikh culture and character can be maintained",[348] turned a *volte face* after joining the Congress ministry in Punjab and supported the Praja Mandal in its demands for responsible government.[349] The Maharaja's constitutional offer of January 1948[350] was rejected by both these bodies.[351]

The Maharaja, in desperation, abandoned even by the Akalis, threw all his weight behind the *biswedars* and hit out at the *Muzara* Movement. The Proclamation of 11 March 1947 was enforced with vigour,[352] tenants were punished for refusing to pay arrears of rent[353] and orders were issued to the police to help the *biswedars* in recovery of rents and possession of lands.[354] Even the army was ordered to help the police in its task of repression.[355] In an interview he gave to Brish Bhan, the Praja Mandal leader, at the end of March 1948, the Maharaja categorically refused to do anything for the

[346] *Biswedars* continued to complain of lack of assistance from officials and police. Most of the reports also do not indicate any action beyond institution of cases, etc.

[347] Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 168.

[348] Patiala State Akali *Jatha's* statement published in *The Tribune*, 21 July 1947, cited in Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 169.

[349] Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 170.

[350] The proposals provided for indirect elections to the Assembly by the members of panchayats and municipal committees, serious limitations were placed on the powers of the Assembly, only half the ministers were to be from the elected members and there was a long list of reserved subjects. *The Tribune*, 8 January 1948.

[351] Joint statement issued by Riyasti Akali Dal, Patiala State Akali *Jatha* and Patiala State Praja Mandal, *The Tribune*, 10 January 1948.

[352] Memorandum submitted by the Patiala State Praja Mandal to the prime minister and the states ministry, Government of India, *AISPC Papers*, File 133, Part 1, 1948 (Patiala State).

[353] *Ibid.*; Orders passed by revenue minister on 15 December 1947 and 10 May 1948, complaints by tenants of village Pharwahi alleging police torture of tenants to extract rent arrears, File on "Landlords' Association, Patiala", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. T-I of 2001 (1945)*; Letter from Inder Singh Chakravarty, General Secretary, Punjab State Praja Mandal, to the prime minister, Patiala, dated 24 March 1948, complaining of ruthless repression of tenants, *AISPC Papers*, File 133, 1948 (Patiala State).

[354] Orders passed on requests from *biswedars*, dated 15 December 1947, 10 May 1948, 3 June 1948, File on "Landlords Association, Patiala", Patiala State Records, *PM's Office Case No. T-I-2001 (1945)*.

[355] Memorandum submitted by the Patiala State Praja Mandal to the prime minister and the states ministry, Government of India, *AISPC Papers*, File 133, Part I, 1948 (Patiala State).

tenants.[356] Such was the repression let loose on the tenants that the president of the Patiala State Praja Mandal issued a fervent appeal in May 1948 to the ministry of states in New Delhi, the AISPC and the prime minister, Patiala (quoting reports received from tahsil Praja Mandals containing harrowing tales of police activities), to intervene.[357] Earlier, too, the Praja Mandal had submitted a memorandum to the states ministry and the prime minister of India in which they had demanded suspension of partition of land and realization of arrears of *batai* till the setting up of a responsible government and had complained that the Maharaja, nervous of his future, had thrown in his lot with the loyalist and communal elements—the *biswedars* and the Sikhs.[358]

The alliance between the Praja Mandal and the Akalis had been an uneasy one and as pointed out in the memorandum quoted earlier, the Akalis were soon back with the Maharaja. The occasion was provided by the Praja Mandal's demand for merger of the states with Punjab, a demand born out of frustration with the rulers' niggardly concessions.[359] This demand touched the Akalis to the quick, for it threatened the basis of their separatist politics. The Sikh states were areas they considered their preserve and would countenance no arrangement which would lead to their being swamped by the "Hindu" majority of Punjab. They promptly put forward an alternative demand—that for the merger of the Punjab states into a separate union which would maintain the Sikhs in a majority.[360] Strangely enough, the

[356] Report on interview, dated 30 March 1948, with Maharaja of Patiala submitted by Brish Bhan, President, Punjab States Regional Council, *AISPC Papers*, File 133, Part I, 1948 (Patiala State).

[357] Letter from the president, Patiala State Praja Mandal, to the prime minister, Patiala with copies to the Ministry of States, the AISPC, etc., dated 5 May 1948, *AISPC Papers*, File 133, Part I, 1948 (Patiala State).

[358] *Ibid*.

[359] The Patiala State Political Conference held on 29 February 1948, at Patiala, presided over by Pattabhi Sitaramayya and attended by 30,000 people, gave two months' notice to the Maharaja to establish a Constituent Assembly, based on adult franchise, to determine the future of the state. Pattabhi Sitaramayya condemned the talk of merger of Sikh states into a separate union and said that Patiala should join a bigger unit. *The Tribune*, 1, 2 March 1948. The Kapurthala Praja Mandal demanded the merger of Kapurthala with Punjab and was supported by the State Congress, the Communist Party and the Hindu Sabha. They were even willing to have a referendum on this question in the state. *The Tribune*, 28 February, 9 March and 24 March 1948. The Kapurthala Political Conference, with Pattabhi Sitaramayya as president, passed a resolution in favour of merger with east Punjab. *The Tribune*, 29 March 1948. Also see Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, pp. 182, 188, 189.

[360] At a conference held at Jaito in the state of Nabha under the auspices of the Shiromani Akali Dal, resolutions were passed demanding creation of Union of Sikh states of Patiala, Nabha, Jind, Faridkot, Kalsia, Malerkotla and Kapurthala and threatening to launch a campaign against any one of these states which refused to join. *The Tribune*, 1 March 1948. The president of the Shiromani Akali Dal, Giani Kartar Singh, issued a statement saying that the overwhelming majority of the people of the east Punjab states were in favour of the Union and that therefore the agitation launched by the Praja Mandal, advocating merger

Congress government at the Centre under the direction of Sardar Patel decided to accept this demand, the object being not to completely alienate the Akalis and the princes.[361] The Patiala and East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) was inaugurated on 15 July 1948 by Sardar Patel[362] who declared it to be the "Homeland of the Sikhs".[363]

The Union came into existence with the Maharaja of Patiala as the rajpramukh, but without a cabinet, for no agreement could be reached between the three rival claimants—the Akali Dal, the Praja Mandal (now transformed into the Pepsu Pradesh Congress) and the Lok Sewak Dal (a party inspired by the Maharaja).[364] A ministry was formed only after six months of wrangling and after a virtual split had been engineered in the Praja Mandal under the inspiration of Sardar Patel, as the official leadership refused to join a ministry headed by Gian Singh Rarewala, a civil servant of 25 years standing, who had joined politics at the behest of the Maharaja and Sardar Patel.[365] The formation of this ministry (in which even the Akalis

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with Punjab, was irresponsible. *The Tribune*, March 1948. The working committee of the Shiromani Akali Dal, at its meeting in 17 March 1948, passed a resolution in favour of the East Punjab States Union (PEPSU) and urged the states ministry to use its good offices to bring it about as soon as possible and also requested Sardar Baldev Singh to take up this matter with the states ministry. *The Tribune*, 21 March 1948. Master Tara Singh headed a Sikh deputation to the Maharaja of Kapurthala to express his disapproval of the suggestion of the merger of the state with east Punjab and urge upon the Maharaja the desirability of his joining the Sikh States' group. He followed it up with an address to the congregation at the local gurdwara in which he reiterated his stand in favour of the union of Sikh states and said that "the Panth shall live, I will maintain Panthic entity even if I were called a communalist". *The Tribune*, 21 March 1948. It was also reported that the Kapurthala Akali *Jatha* was planning to hold a big Akali Conference presided over by Master Tara Singh to oppose the merger of the state with east Punjab. *The Tribune*, 28 March 1948. Letter from Jathedar Pritam Singh Gojran to Sardar Patel, Nabha State Records, File 509/E-5, Patiala: Punjab State Archives, cited in Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 189. Master Tara Singh had expressed a similar desire at a political conference in Nabha in April 1948.

361 V.P. Menon, Secretary, States Ministry, in a press conference held as early as March, had indicated that there was a plan to integrate Jind, Nabha, Malerkotla, Kapurthala and Faridkot into one union which would not be merged with east Punjab. At this stage, however, Patiala did not figure in the union, the idea being that big states need not be touched. *The Tribune*, 28 March 1948. When the formation of the union became certain, the Shiromani Akali Dal expressed its delight and urged that the Interim government of this union be formed in consultation with the Shiromani Akali Riasti Dal. *Hindustan Times*, 2 June 1948. See also Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 191.

362 Patel arrived in Patiala to inaugurate PEPSU and was greeted with cries of "Sat Sri Akal" and "Sardar Patel Zindabad". *The Tribune*, 15 July 1948.

363 Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 191.

364 V.P. Menon, *The Story of the Integration of the Indian States*, 1956, pp. 248–49; *The Tribune*, 16 July 1948.

365 The "rebels", who formed a parallel Pepsu Pradesh Congress Committee and joined the ministry on Patel's prompting were Giani Zail Singh, Seth Ram Nath and Nihal Singh Takshak. Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, pp. 191–92.

refused to participate) left the radical Praja Mandal leadership out in the cold, thus preventing any solution of the *muzaras*' problem.[366] In fact, one reason why they were kept out of power by the states' ministry (not known for its radicalism) was their support to the Communist-led tenant movement and their known stand in favour of land reforms. Positive proof of this had been their success in getting Jagir Singh Joga, the veteran Communist and Praja Mandal leader, elected to the office of president of the Patiala State Praja Mandal.[367]

The *muzaras*' struggle for land continued and the main focus continued to be on non-payment of rent, thus refusing in practice to recognize the *biswedars*' right to the land and to a part of its produce. The landlords' attempts at eviction for non-payment of rent were increasingly resisted by the tenants, often successfully. However, the success of the movement and the increase in the boldness and militancy of its participants resulted in an increase in physical clashes between tenants and *biswedars*, which were provoked most often by the *biswedars*' forcible attempts, with the aid of bands of strongmen, to realize *batai* or evict the tenants from the land. The inept and weak administration appeared unable to either prevent the *biswedars* from taking the law into their own hands and forcibly pressing their claims, or to stem the growing discontent and militancy of the tenants by means of an imaginative strategy. Even its capacity of pure repression seemed to have declined with the growth of the strength of the movement and the situation was increasingly beginning to resemble that of a civil war in which the contending classes or political groups were left, by and large, to settle the issue between themselves as best as they could. (We use the analogy of a civil war to distinguish the situation which we witness in Patiala from a revolutionary one, in which the confrontation is between an aspiring political group or classes and the existing state. In fact, as we shall show later, the *Muzara* Movement and its leadership consciously refrained from organizing or encouraging any direct confrontation with the forces of the state and the couple of instances of armed clashes between the *muzara* volunteers and the state forces were really the exceptions that proved the rule and were in fact forced upon the *muzara* leadership.)

This relative weakness of the administration, its inability to exercise authority, even by force, was an important factor in explaining the success of the movement for non-payment of *batai* and refusal to vacate lands when landlords insisted on eviction. Since the state hardly ever succeeded in intervening, the tenants could defy the *biswedars* with impunity and with little cost to themselves, *unless the biswedars, on their own, organized their own force of gundas to attack the tenants*. In the latter case, the superior numerical

[366] *Ibid*., p. 193.
[367] *Ibid*.

strength of the tenants, their high morale born out of a conviction in their cause, their being organized into a movement, which meant that other peasants as well as political cadre would rally to their support, often acted as a deterrent to organized action on the part of the *biswedars* and it was only a particularly determined *biswedar* or one with connections in the administration or the police, who would dare to impose his rights by force.

It is interesting to note, in this context, how the strategy of the *Muzara* Movement gradually evolved in response to this state of affairs. From 1945 onwards, when the movement became very assertive and tenants refused *batai*, not sporadically, as in the earlier years, but consistently and *biswedars* began to attempt evictions on the basis of non-payment of *batai*, the obvious new element in the strategy was to prevent these evictions by organizing resistance. Increasingly, as some landlords began to use armed gangs, the necessity for the movement to resist this armed onslaught by organizing its armed wing arose. And subsequently, this is what the Communists attempted to do during 1946–47. This decision to organize an armed volunteer corps was further strengthened and given a concrete form by the formation in 1948 of the Lal Communist Party, by Teja Singh Swatantar and a break away group of Punjab Communists (mostly belonging to the "Kirti" wing), who disagreed with the official CPI line of Muslim nationality and Pakistan and wanted to adopt militant, that is, armed methods of struggle to oppose partition as well as in the peasant movement and, when the CPI refused to accept this line, decided to break away.[368] Teja Singh Swatantar found his

[368] G.S. Randhawa, in his interview, says: "The split in 1948 came about as a result of national issues; one of which was support to the idea of Pakistan, which we opposed because nationality is not based on religion. Also, the mistakes of 1942, (the consequences of) which we are suffering to this day. True, we wanted to fight fascism, but this did not mean we should stop the anti-imperialist struggle. We isolated ourselves from the nationalist current and are paying the price to this day. On these issues there was discontent, and the leadership at that time (P.C. Joshi was General Secretary), instead of trying to solve the problem politically, tried to solve it organisationally by removing such people (who opposed the party line). As a result, the major section of the (Punjab) party, after the communal riots, left the CPI. The *Kirti* group was the main wing of the Party in Punjab, and this group came over entirely to the Lal Party. I was also part of this group. Similarly, other people in the party, Ranadive, Ajoy Ghosh, were questioning Joshi's position, but we did not know this as this time. Even after the break, we identified ourselves emotionally with the Telengana struggle, and considered it our movement, and similar to our struggle". Interview. Jagir Singh Joga gives a similar account: "The split was over policies. We were against Partition, we argued that we should be armed, we should be allowed to be armed, and we will not allow Partition to take place. At the All-India Kisan Sabha session in Sikandra Rao in UP in 1947, Teja Singh Swatantar argued that the Punjab and Bengal units should be allowed to undertake armed conflict (to prevent Partition). Joshi was general secretary and Bhowani Sen supported him, so we lost. The entire *kisan* wing in Punjab came over to the Lal party. I was initially with the other (CPI) wing, but since the entire *kisan* wing went over to the Lal party and I could not abandon the *kisan* movement, I too went along" (interview).

natural home with the *Muzara* Movement, which was the only movement in Punjab which conformed to his notions of militant struggle and in which the necessity for organizing armed resistance to *biswedari* repression was already being felt. Under his direction, the process of formation of this group of armed volunteers was pushed ahead and by the end of 1948, there came into existence this small band of armed men whose duty was to rush to the aid of *muzaras* who were threatened with physical, especially armed, assault by the *biswedars* and their organized gangs. However, quite contrary to popular notions and communist mythology, the size of this "armed force" was never more than 30 or 40 people, the largest estimate being 100.[369]

This new development contributed an added dimension to the *muzaras'* struggle for land. Of course, the other planks of the struggle continued, that is, non-payment of *batai* and resistance of *biswedars'* forcible attempts at removal of crops and eviction from land by means of collecting a "crowd" of peasants, men and women, both from the village under attack as well as from neighbouring tenant and *bhaichara* villages with whom the peasants had kinship as well as political ties.[370] The new element was that the *biswedars* who wanted to use brute force to press their claims had to also calculate on the possibility of the "armed force" turning up to assist the "crowd" in offering resistance.[371] That this did act as a considerable deterrent on *biswedars*, who might have otherwise contemplated a use of force, is shown by the small number of actual clashes between the *biswedars'* gangs and the Communists' "armed force" as well as in the perceptible decline in the *biswedars'* attacks on tenants[372] and the tendency of *biswedars* to try and come

[369] G.S. Randhawa, in his interview, said that there were about 100 volunteers. He also said, however, that Giani Bachhan Singh was incharge of this "armed wing", and Giani Bachhan Singh, in his interview, stated categorically that there were about 30–35 trained men. His account of the recruitment and training of this force bears citing at length: "Teja Singh Swatantar made me incharge of organizing this armed force. Initially, Swatantar gave us 4 or 5 arms. Then we got some arms by raising subscriptions from tenant villages. We also seized some weapons in the villages. We recruited boys of *muzaras*, who were ex-soldiers. We had about 30–35 trained people who were at our beck and call." Interview with Giani Bachhan Singh. Comrade Hari Singh, a communist activist from Bakshiwalla, Giani Bachhan Singh's village, also estimated the number at "less than a hundred" (interview).

[370] Interviews with G.S. Randhawa, Baba Bachhitar Singh and Jagir Singh Joga.

[371] G.S. Randhawa repeatedly emphasized this aspect. He says that "the 'armed volunteers' were organised only for self-defence against the armed gangs of the *biswedars*. Ours were not terrorist actions, but only an organized self-defence of the mass movement. Our volunteers were not allowed to retain the arms, after any 'action', the arms were collected and kept with some very trusted member of the party. We kept great control because we knew that once *muzara* boys were given arms, they may do any thing and we did not want our movement to take a wrong direction" (interview).

[372] Between 1948 and 1951, *The Tribune* reports only two such incidents, one in which one tenant and another in which three peasants were shot dead by landlords. *The Tribune*, 28 April 1949, and 29 September 1951. Apart from this, the only references are to the Kishangarh and Bakhora incidents, which we will discuss later, in which the confrontation was primarily

to an "amicable settlement" with the tenants, which was often a euphemism for their surrendering their rights on the land.[373]

It should perhaps also be clarified here that the whole object of this "armed force" was to prevent the *biswedars* from an arbitrary use of force and at no stage was this "armed force" intended to take on the state forces. In fact, it was explicitly ordered *not* to get into situations in which a confrontation with the police was likely.[374] This can best be illustrated with the example of Kishangarh, for the simple reason that this was the *only* incident in which a major clash with the forces of the state actually occurred, though here too it was unexpected and unprovoked and in fact accidental.

In Kishangarh, an old stronghold of the *Muzara* Movement, there were two landlords, Bhagwan Singh and Siyasat Singh, who were also superintendents of police. These two decided, after an ordinance was issued by the government in January 1949 declaring partition of land between landlords and tenants on the basis of one-fourth to landlords and three-fourths to tenants, to forcibly implement this in their village with the help of armed *gundas* and the police. In the clash that ensued with the militant peasants of

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between the tenants and the state forces. Admittedly, *The Tribune* is not likely to have reported all such incidents, but in the absence of government records for this period, we have no other source of information except the Communist leaders themselves and since they are not likely to underplay the biswedars' oppression, one can accept their account as reliable.

[373] Interview with G.S. Randhawa. He also notes that around this time many landlords started fleeing from the villages out of fear, abandoning their lands. "Our instruction to our volunteers were that selected landlords should be beaten up soundly, *not killed*, so that they were frightened. There were 10 or 15 such incidents and this scared the landlords." Interview. See *All-India Kisan Sabha Bulletin*, Vol. I, No. 5, December 1952, and Vol. II, No. 2, February 1953, for reports of landlords' coming to an 'amicable settlement' with tenants. Also see footnote 376, this chapter, for landlords' complaints to Central Government regarding "lawlessness" in PEPSU.

[374] Jagir Singh Joga also records: "Our volunteers had strict instructions not to confront the police. They were only to confront the landlords' guards and armed gangs, but not the government forces". In response to the question: "How did you avoid confrontation with the police?" Joga said: "When the police came, they (the armed volunteers) would run away. The police could not reach everywhere at the same time, after all. That is why, apart from Kishangarh, there was no major clash with the police". To a further question; "Then this 'armed struggle' was really with the landlords' *gundas*?" Joga replied: "Yes", and quipped: "because police in the *riyasat* (state) stayed in the *thanas*, and not in the villages". Interview. Giani Bachhan Singh confirms that "this force was only meant to confront the landlords' *gundas*, not the police, not other exploiters. The police only if they actually attacked us, as in Kishangarh. These volunteers stayed in their own villages. When we received information that *gundas* were about to attack in a particular village, and this we usually found out a couple of days before the planned attack, we would send messages to this force to collect. The arms always remained in my personal custody or with some trusted member" (interview). Comrade Hari Singh corroborates: "Apart from Kishangarh, there was no clash with the police or army". Interview. G.S. Randhawa said: "The clashes were with the landlords' men, not the police" (interview).

the village, some of the *gundas*, it seems, were killed, and also, by mistake, a sub-inspector of the police. It was clear that the administration would not take the killing of the policeman lying down and retaliation was expected. Anticipating this, and realizing that they could not afford to confront a concerted attack by the forces of the state, the Communist leadership that was present in the village decided to send away all the outsiders, that is, peasants of neighbouring villages, the members of the "armed wing" who had collected there earlier to resist the landlords' onslaught, and this was done. However, also realizing that if all the leaders as well as the armed volunteers went away, this would be tantamount to deserting the peasants in their moment of crisis, and would have a very demoralizing effect on the movement and the village, it was decided that a token representation of the leadership as well as the "armed wing" remain in the village, and Dharam Singh Fakkar along with four armed volunteers (all ex-soldiers) stayed back. As expected, the government sent in the army, and the village was surrounded and asked to surrender. The peasants refused to comply and the army entered the village, rounded up the resisters, and in the fracas, the four armed volunteers were killed. Dharam Singh Fakkar, however, escaped a similar fate, due to the intervention of an army officer, who restrained the policeman who wanted to use this opportunity to shoot him down, on the ground that the policeman could not take the law into his own hands. Fakkar and twenty-six others were arrested and a conspiracy case was filed against them. However, through the efforts of Brish Bhan, Des Raj, Harbans Lal, that is, the left-wing Praja Mandalists who formed a Kishangarh Defence Committee to defend the accused, all of them were subsequently acquitted and released.[375]

What is in fact significant about the Kishangarh incident is that it was *not* planned or intended by the Communist leaders, and that it was the *only* one in which a major confrontation with the police actually occurred, and that it was not therefore representative of the Communist functioning in the *Muzara* Movement, though, predictably, because of the killing of members of the "armed force" as well as of some tenants, it became an important symbol of the movement and is quoted to this day as an example of the heroic "armed struggle" of the Lal Party and of the militancy of the *Muzara* Movement. Our attempt here is not to minimize the importance of Kishangarh, nor to deny the sacrifices and heroism of those who fought and died, but only to place it in a correct perspective vis-à-vis the contemporary Communist strategy in the *Muzara* Movement. In that sense, Kishangarh was the exception and not the rule, and the main strategy of the *Muzara* Movement remained a combination of refusal to pay *batai*,

[375] This account is based on interviews with G.S. Randhawa, Jagir Singh Joga, Giani Bachhan Singh, Baba Bachhitar Singh and Comrade Hari Singh. Also see *The Tribune*, 20, 22 and 23 March 1949.

refusal to vacate lands and resist landlords' attempts at evictions, etc., if necessary, by force.

This remained the broad pattern of the movement from roughly 1948 to 1952. Meanwhile, important political developments had been taking place at the national as well as provincial level. The ministry headed by G.S. Rarewala, the Maharaja's uncle and consisting of the Maharaja's men, the right-wing of the Praja Mandal (now the Congress), etc., which had been installed in January 1949, was an extremely unstable one and lacked substantial popular support, since neither the Akalis nor the left-wing of the Praja Mandal (which was in fact the dominant section within the Praja Mandal and had been a consistent ally of the Communists in the *Muzara* Movement) were represented on it. Also, though it made a few attempts at handling the problem of the tenants (by ordering, in August 1949, a partition of land on the basis of one-fourth to landlords and three-fourths to tenants, an improvement on the Maharaja's offer of one-third and two-thirds), it by and large failed to either offer something that was acceptable to the tenants or to use the state machinery to effectively counter the tenants' resistance and establish its own authority over the rebellious villages.[376] This ministry itself could not last very long, and was replaced by a caretaker government headed by Rarewala which continued till May 1951. This government appears to have made little effort to tackle the situation.

[376] G.S. Randhawa records that when the order of partition on the basis of one-fourth and three-fourths was issued, the Communists discussed this at an underground meeting with militant representatives of the peasants held at Tamkot. Though some of the weaker villages and richer tenants were in favour of accepting this offer, the decision taken was to continue the struggle for proprietary rights and refuse to accept three-fourths. This decision, he says, gave great strength to the *muzaras*, who felt that because of their struggle they had been offered three-fourths of the land, and if they struggled more, they could get the whole of the land. Therefore, the government's effort at disrupting the movement, which was inherent in this proclamation, was a failure. He also notes that the increased militancy of the movement in this phase was also because of the impact of general reforms that were being introduced in the country as a whole, as a result of Independence, and the fact that the Central Government was known to be in favour of reforms. He further says that the administration was unable to protect the landlords, and the latter were conscious that they had to do this on their own. In fact, the landlords were constantly complaining that there was no law and order in the state, that the Communists had set up a parallel government, that they were levying taxes on the people, etc. He gives the example of the incident in village Bakhora in 1951, in which the tenants succeeded, with the help of the armed wing, but without any casualties, in chasing away the landlords' armed gangs and the police, and unlike Kishangarh, there was no attempt at reprisal by the administration. He adds, however, that the Communists had also learnt the lesson of Kishangarh, and had cleared out of the village after the initial clash, to avoid any chance of confrontation with a larger police force (interview). Also see *The Tribune*, 30 March 1949, for the landlords' memorandum to the Central Government complaining of the "Communist menace" and the state government's inability to provide protection to them against this menace. Also see *The Tribune*, 8 October 1951, for a PEPSU government communiqué refuting the landlords' complaint to the Central Government that lawlessness prevailed in Patiala and Communists had set up a parallel government.

Victorious *Muzaras*, Confused Communists: Land Reforms, 1951–53

The formation of a new, purely Congress ministry in 1951, in which Brish Bhan was deputy chief minister and his group had a strong presence, changed the situation. An Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee was set up to make recommendations regarding suitable legislation to solve the tenants' problem and the process of agrarian reform set in motion. Till such time as the legislation could be enacted, the PEPSU Tenancy (Temporary Provision) Act was promulgated in January 1952 which protected tenants against eviction. However, before this process could proceed much further, the 1952 General Elections intervened. In the Assembly that was elected, the Congress did not have a clear majority, securing only 26 seats out of 60 and could form a government only with the help of some independents. However, on the very first day the ministry faced the assembly, on the occasion of the election of the speaker, it was threatened by defections. It could have been saved only if the three Communist members of the house (2 CPI and 1 Lal Communist Party) had extended support to the Congress ministry of which Brish Bhan and his group were members. Instead, in their wisdom, they extended support to the rival group headed by Gian Singh Rarewala, now a right-wing Akali, who was chief minister when the army had been ordered into Kishangarh in 1949. He now proceeded to form the government at the head of a motley collection of "Haryani and Punjabi-speaking Jats".[377] However, even the Rarewala government, which survived for one year under constant threats of defections, though it introduced the agrarian legislation in the Assembly, was unable to see it through before the Assembly was dissolved on grounds of chronic political instability and president's rule was proclaimed, in March 1953.

The introduction of president's rule, and the taking over of the reins of the administration by P.S. Rau, Adviser to the Governor, PEPSU, brought about a qualitative change in the situation, which had important implications for the *Muzara* Movement. Already, the initiation of the process of agrarian reform, and the realization by the peasantry that the satisfaction of their demands was but a question of time, had tended to weaken the aggressive stance of the peasants and the militant character of their resistance, since the necessity of forcible wresting of rights was diminished by the possibility, and increasing certainty, of acquiring them through an easier, if more expensive method. The new administration added a new dimension to the scene. While pushing forward the process of agrarian reform, it simultaneously insisted on restoring the authority of the administration in the affected rural areas, an authority that had been virtually non-existent since the last days of the Maharaja, and which the chronic instability of the

[377] Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 197.

successive ministries had done little to restore. This it did by insisting on payment of three years' arrears of rent (the maximum arrears permissible under the law), and by enforcing this by an effective use of the police force.[378] This re-establishment of the authority of the government meant that any attempts at resistance, armed or otherwise, would be indulged in at a heavy cost, a cost that the tenants were increasingly unwilling to pay, given the prospect of acquiring proprietary rights by legislative action. This prospect soon turned into reality when the president issued the PEPSU Occupancy Tenants (Vesting of Proprietary Rights) Act. Under this Act, occupancy tenants could become owners of their land by paying compensation amounting to 12 times the land revenue, an amount which (given the war-time and post-war inflation and the fact that land revenue continued to be assessed at the pre-war rates) was none too large. This legislation, though it did not meet fully the Communists' demand of transfer of proprietary rights *without compensation*, was obviously found acceptable by the tenants, specially when calculated with the high cost to be paid, if further resistance was attempted, in view of the new and effective tough line adopted by the administration,[379] and no further resistance was reported.[380] The combination of concessions and containment led to the end of the long-drawn struggle of the *muzaras* for restoration of their hereditary proprietary rights.[381]

[378] Interviews with G. S. Randhawa and Jagir Singh Joga.

[379] G.S. Randhawa stated the issue thus: "The problem was how to face Rau, what tactical line to follow with Rau. Earlier, when there was the ministry, whether Rarewala's or Raghbir Singh's, when there was no administration worth the name, and the two groups were fighting amongst themselves, even before the police started out on their job, we were in the know and prepared to take action. But when Rau came, with Janak Raj as CID officer, and revamped the administration, and those elements in the administration who were sympathetic to us were not there, then we could not stand up to the repression. We could not confront them squarely. Besides the legislation giving land to the tenants had meant that occupancy tenants as well as tenants-at-will, whose names were recorded in the *girdawari* became owners after paying the required compensation.

[380] Another act which was passed at the same time restricted the amount of land that landlords could retain to 100 acres, and gave tenants-at-will the right to acquire the surplus land by paying compensation amounting to 90 times the land revenue. The Communists probably had a greater chance of organizing resistance around this issue, since the amount of compensation was quite substantial, but then their movement had been based mainly on the occupancy tenants who were not willing to fight any more and the tenants-at-will have only begun to be organized at a very late stage and did not as yet have enough strength to resist. Besides, among them, too, the prospect of acquiring land by paying compensation, and that too in reasonable instalments, appears to have been sufficient to prevent the growth of any organized movement. Interviews with G.S. Randhawa and Jagir Singh Joga.

[381] Interview with Baba Bachhitar Singh. In response to the question: how did the movement come to an end, Baba Bachhitar Singh said: "It came to an end because the tenants' demands were accepted". Jagir Singh Joga echoes the same: "Once the legislation was passed, it became very difficult for us to continue the movement, because most occupancy tenants preferred to pay 12 times the land revenue, which did not amount to very much, and become owners of their land" (interview).

This period also coincided with the merger of the Lal Communist Party with the CPI, and this too meant that "left adventurism", that is, armed struggle, had to be given up, even in theory, since the CPI was just recovering from the debacle of the post-1948 line of armed struggle that it had followed from 1948–51. All told, for a variety of reasons, the continuation of the *Muzara* Movement, in the form that it had existed, became unviable.

The Communists continued, however, to condemn the new agrarian legislation as inadequate because *biswedars*' lands were not being confiscated without compensation,[382] though admittedly the level of compensation was pretty low and by and large acceptable to the peasantry.[383] Clearly, in their framework of reference there was no room for a bourgeois reformist state that actually carried out land reform and they had no theoretical means of absorbing this policy that had come about as a result of the shift in the balance of class forces following Independence and they continued, therefore, to harp, in an increasingly unconvincing and perhaps ritualistic manner, on the inadequacy and meaninglessness of these reforms. This resulted in their growing isolation from the peasants, a process that was also furthered by their opportunist alliances with the right-wing and communal political groups and desertion of their erstwhile comrades-in-arms in the *Muzara* Movement and the Praja Mandal, the left-wing Congress group led by Brish Bhan, who had stood steadfast in their loyalty to the *muzaras*' cause as well as to the Communists and had been as vocal and adamant as the Communists in projecting the *muzara* issue[384] and had in fact paid the political price of being left out in the cold, because of their links with the Communists, when the first ministry had been formed in 1949.[385] Also, the

[382] The Communists insisted that no compensation be paid, while the government insisted that the Constitution did not allow them to accept this proposal and nominal compensation had to be included in the legislation. See, for example, *All-India Kisan Sabha Bulletin, 1, 3 and 5, September and December 1952 and 2, l and 2, January and February 1953*. Brish Bhan had an interesting comment on the Communists' insistence on "no compensation": "Sometimes Communists insist on something that is not practicable, at other times they sacrifice even what is not necessary" (interview).

[383] See footnote 381, this chapter.

[384] Apart from the consistent support extended by this group since the inception of the *Muzara* Movement, even after the integration of Patiala into the Indian Union, this group had continued to fight for the *muzara* cause. See, for example, Sunder Lal's (treasurer, PEPSU Congress Committee) criticism of the ordinance which sought to partition the land on the basis of one-fourth and three-fourths. *The Tribune*, 25 August 1949. Another left-wing Congressman, Harbans Lal (president, PEPSU Congress Committee) charged the PEPSU administration with partiality for landlords and complained that the police were harassing tenants. He also demanded emergency legislation banning ejectments. He also complained against the police arresting tenants in Bakhora village. *The Tribune*, 6 July and 9 August 1951.

[385] Brish Bhan recounts how, when negotiations for the formation of the ministry in PEPSU were going on in 1948, Sardar Patel insisted that he drop Jagir Singh Joga from the Patiala unit of the Praja Mandal because he was a Communist. Brish Bhan refused, on the plea that

pressure of this group had been greatly instrumental in encouraging the government to introduce the agrarian legislation in question.[386] Besides, *on the Communists' own testimony*, they had hardly any ideological differences with this group of Congressmen, who were sturdily secular and left-minded, and, in the past, no political differences either.[387] And yet, when it came to

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he would not desert his comrades and paid the price of being kept out of the ministry (interview). Also see Walia, *Praja Mandal Movement*, p. 193.

[386] Apart from the legislation mentioned earlier, the Congress government, which came to power after the mid-term poll in 1954, had, under pressure from its left-wing, reduced the ceiling on land ownership to 30 acres. Brish Bhan records that as a result of the policies he pursued, he succeeded in alienating "all the landed aristocracy, businessmen, bureaucrats, liberals. Giani Zail Singh, etc., (the right-wing Congressmen), all opposed me.... The Congressmen after coming to power became reactionary, liberal, and looked only to their own interests. But I succeeded with Panditji's (Nehru's) help" (interview).

[387] The Communist leaders were unable, in spite of our repeated questions on this aspect, to pinpoint any area of ideological difference between themselves and the left-wing Praja Mandalists. Jagir Singh Joga, for example, in response to the question whether the Communists had any ideological differences with Brish Bhan and other left-wing Praja Mandalists, said: "Brish Bhan was of progressive views and had very good relations with us. He was not like Giani Zail Singh, who was different from the beginning. With Brish Bhan, we had no differences though he was not a Communist. Politically he agreed with us, and the reason he did not become a Communist was because, he used to say, he could not take the hardship involved in going to the villages, etc. In fact I was responsible for bringing him and his group (Harbans Lal, Des Raj, etc.) into the movement. When they were in Lahore I used to go to their college and give them political books. They joined the movement around 1937 and did a lot of work for the AISPC session at Ludhiana, in 1939. They were lawyers and used to fight the *muzaras*' law cases without fees. In the Praja Mandal, we were all in the same wing. The other wing (Seth Ram Nath, etc.) were opposed to the *Muzara* Movement, but since we (that is, Communists and left-wing Praja Mandalists) were stronger, the right-wing could do nothing about it" (interview).

Giani Bachhan Singh said in the same vein: "The Praja Mandal group of Brish Bhan, Harbans Lal, Des Raj, etc., was a progressive group, with socialist ideology, and gave full support to the *Muzara* Movement. They too wanted change, revolution but via Gandhian methods. Our differences were only over the role of the Gandhi, the role of Russia, etc. At the practical level of the movement, we never had any differences with them. They did not even oppose our armed force. In fact, they agreed that there was no other way of fighting the *biswedars*' illegal use of force except by resort to force" (interview).

Brish Bhan too confirms the lack of ideological differences with the Communists. To quote: "They were all my comrades, working with us... we were mentally close.... We had the common objective of working for the overthrow of the feudal forces.... (that is why) I made Joga the President of the Praja Mandal in 1948, to strengthen the left and radical elements.... I believed in left, extreme left politics. I believed in land to the tiller, I was dubbed a Communist. I never had any problems in working with the Communists before 1947". The extent of the ideological similarity between Brish Bhan and the Communists is also shown by his acceptance of and belief in some of the more doubtful Communist characterizations of contemporary developments and personalities. For example, he says of Nehru: "He was a liberal bourgeois who believed in British-type system (referring to parliamentary democracy)…. He was influenced by leftist ideas but also by Gandhi. Perhaps there was also some opportunism. He could not become a leader without Gandhi. He should have joined Bose" (interview).

the question of functioning in electoral and legislative politics, the Communists had no hesitation in allying with the rival right-wing and communal groups.[388] The reason advanced by the Communists for this desertion of erstwhile comrades and supporters and defenders of the Communists and *muzaras*, who were responsible for the acquittal of all the Kishangarh accused, when they joined hands with Rarewala in 1952 in defeating the Congress ministry which included Brish Bhan, was that, since for them all "bourgeois" parties are the same and the job of Communists is to exploit all contradictions in the bourgeois camp and play one group against the other to advance "the people's interests", they bargained with Rarewala and got him to agree to give more concessions to the tenants, by way of reducing the compensation recommended by the Agrarian Reforms Enquiry Committee and on that condition agreed to extend support.[389] Brish Bhan, however, gives a different version. He maintains that the Communists supported the Akalis in PEPSU because of an understanding arrived at between Harkishan Singh Surjeet, the Punjab CPI leader, and the Akalis, with regard to a seat that had been vacated in the Punjab Assembly, and which the Akalis agreed to give to the CPI, provided the PEPSU Communists supported Rarewala.[390]

However, even if we accept the Communists' own version of events, or the possibility that the truth lay somewhere in between or in both the

[388] It is interesting that the Communists never formed a United Front, or had United-Front type relations, either at election time or afterwards in the Assembly, with the Congress or its left-wing, though they at various times supported other groups, including the Akalis and Rarewala. In the 1954 mid-term poll, for example, Joga stood against his old comrade, Des Raj, and defeated him, while Harbans Lal, another left-wing Congressman, was defeated by Dharam Singh Fakkar. Interview with Jagir Singh Joga.

[389] Interviews with G.S. Randhawa and Jagir Singh Joga. To quote Randhawa: "There was a no-confidence motion pending and our support would decide whether the ministry would survive or not. We said that we would support that group which gave maximum concessions to tenants." Jagir Singh Joga was more forthcoming: "We were told by the party that we should support the Akalis. We had three members in the Assembly and they were crucial for the Ministry. So we said that we would support whoever suggests the lowest compensation. When Rarewala suggested one pie instead of one anna (the reference is to a bill which was to abolish *ala-malkiyat* rights of the ruler of Faridkot), we supported him. *For us there was no difference between the Congress and the Akalis*."

[390] "In fact", says Brish Bhan, "in 1957, they supported the feudal lords, even the Maharaja of Patiala, against me". Brish Bhan recognizes, however, that the PEPSU Communists did this under direction from the party, that is, the CPI, and for that reason, he has no personal animus against his erstwhile comrades, whom he continues to regard with affection and respect, though combined with regret at the consequences of their "foolishness". In fact, he explicitly stated: "my view is (that) they should not have left the Congress. (If they had stayed in the Congress) they could have ruled the country. Then all these reactionaries, feudals, businessmen, blackmarketeers, bureaucrats and corruption would have been swept off. But unfortunately the average Communist was not politically conscious and educated, and in PEPSU they were interested only in getting the land" (interview).

versions, and that, while the reasons for their decision may have been the Punjab developments, they also used this opportunity to extract concessions for the tenants, their decision to support right-wing and communal elements in preference to secular political forces, which included a sizeable section of left-wing Congressmen, who were also committed to agrarian reform and had in fact already initiated the process, was a case of severe political myopia. The right-wing and communal group led by Rarewala, on the other hand, was astute enough to realize that, given the situation, agrarian reform was inevitable, and was therefore willing to use the Communists in their own political battle with the secular and left-wing forces by promising minor concessions.

The adoption of this myopic, even opportunist, policy helped in no small way, in the long-run, to seal the fate of the secular and leftward-oriented elements in Punjab politics and certainly facilitated the ascendancy of right-wing and communal politics. This was especially unfortunate because the Communists, at least in the early 1950s, did have a significant mass base in the rural areas, having functioned virtually as the rural or peasant wing of the Praja Mandal for many years, and the non-Communist left in the Praja Mandal had mainly concentrated in the urban areas and had no independent mass base in the countryside, just as the Communists had very little in the towns.[391] As a result of the Communists' desertion, the earlier non-Communist left-wing Praja Mandalists, who were now left-wing Congressmen, were left isolated and their capacity to resist the ideological and political onslaught of the right-wing and communal elements seriously eroded.[392]

In the long run, the Communists were also the losers in this game, because they were too weak, on their own, to struggle effectively against the gradual ascendancy of the Akalis and other communal and semi-communal and right-wing groups, including right-wing Congressmen, and sooner or later found that, far from increasing their mass base, even among the peasantry, their earlier mass base was beginning to get eroded and their erstwhile followers were becoming supporters of either the Akalis or of the increasingly right-wing dominated Congress party.[393] As was most

[391] To quote Jagir Singh Joga: "Brish Bhan, etc., were town boys, and *we* (that is, the Communists) were responsible for bringing the kisans into the movement. They had no independent link with the peasants" (interview).

[392] Brish Bhan expressed this isolation thus: "I remained a lonely man. It is very difficult to mobilize people for struggle on ideological issues. 'Those whom I educated and liberated, they (the tenants) betrayed us, they became just like other kisans and joined the Akalis" (interview).

[393] Interview with Baba Bachhitar Singh. Even in his own village, according to the Baba, Akalis have become strong, though earlier, in the days of the *Muzara* Movement, the Communist hold was so strong that Teja Singh Swatantar would himself be hidden in this village, as the police would not dare enter it. Brish Bhan in his interview records: "Those tenants whom we

poignantly stated by an 85-year old grass-roots Communist worker to the author in 1981: "These people for whom we fought so hard do not even offer us a drink of water these days".[394]

liberated have now become followers of the Akalis". Interview. G.S. Randhawa also confirms that the tenants became followers of the Congress and the Akalis (interview).

[394] Interview with Baba Bachhitar Singh. In fact, he went much further and, said: "Today they (the tenants) are the new *sirdars* (that is, *biswedars*). They are now rich and have left us (the Party)".

Book II

Interrogating Peasant Historiography: Peasant Perspectives, Marxist Practice and Subaltern Theory

EIGHT

Peasants and Anti-Colonial Nationalism

Of the three basic approaches that have emerged in the writing of modern Indian history—the imperialist or neo-imperialist, the nationalist and the Marxist—it is to the broad Marxist approach or tradition that the vast majority of writings on peasant resistance have tended to belong. The imperialist and neo-imperialist school is virtually silent on this aspect and the nationalist contribution has been quite meagre.

More recently, however, a new trend of historiography has emerged, popularly identified as the "subaltern" school, which dismisses all previous historical writing as élite historiography which has little to offer by way of an understanding of the history of the people. It seeks to replace this "old", "blinkered", "élite" historiography with what it claims is a new "subaltern" or people's historiography.

Two major themes that have emerged in the writing of the scholars writing under the "subaltern" banner are: (*a*) peasant resistance and peasant consciousness in colonial India and (*b*) the relationship between the peasantry and the national movement. In this chapter, I will focus my discussion on the relationship between the peasants, peasant movements and nationalism and the Indian national movement. The attempt is to discuss some issues relating to the question of peasants and anti-colonial nationalism in India in a historiographical perspective, and examine subaltern and traditional Marxian notions about how peasants relate to Indian nationalism in the light of evidence about peasant perspectives, much of it gleaned from participant–activists of peasant politics who proved to be really valuable oral history sources.

The "subaltern" brand of historiography[1] places the national movement led by the Congress and the politics of the peasants in two separate and

[1] The volumes edited by Ranajit Guha under the title of "Subaltern Studies" are an obvious part of what goes by the name of the "subaltern school", but the other writings of the scholars who form part of the "subaltern" group are also treated as part of the writing of this school. On this basis, I have included Gyanendra Pandey's *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar*

autonomous domains of politics—one "élite" and the other "subaltern". It sees their relationship, such as it was, as being characterized by a "structural dichotomy"; in other words, it was basically antagonistic. This dichotomy was so pronounced that any effort at "braiding together of the two strands of élite and subaltern politics led invariably to explosive situations indicating that the masses mobilised by the élite to fight for their own objectives managed to break away from their control and put the characteristic imprint of popular politics on campaigns initiated by the upper classes". The national movement, being an "élite" movement, could have nothing positive to contribute to a peasantry that already had, before its association with the national movement, a political consciousness of which "resistance to élite domination" was an "invariant" part. Its greater association with "élite" nationalism could only lead to efforts at its domination and hegemonization, though these efforts could not really succeed and would only lead to "explosive situations".[2] The subalternists, thus, either deny the fact of the close relationship between the peasantry and the national movement or, when it is too obvious to be successfully denied, assert that it was marked by efforts on the part of the élite Congress leadership to "control and, if necessary, suppress the stream of popular politics".[3]

The subalternists also question the conventional wisdom about the growing participation, over time, of the peasantry as a whole in the national movement and in the major mass struggles launched by it—a wisdom that had not hitherto been questioned by any strand of historiography, including the traditional Marxists who otherwise have their own critique of the interaction between the peasants and the national movement. The subalternists believe that "on the contrary ... as the organization and strength of the Congress increased and the scale of its campaigns widened, the social depth of the movement actually diminished".[4] This assertion is based on the notion that the extension of Congress organization, which enhanced the ability of the "élite" national movement to impose its own "élite" forms

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Pradesh, Sumit Sarkar's *Modern India* and *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, Partha Chatterjee's *Bengal 1920–1947: The Land Question*, Stephen Henningham's *Peasant Movements in Colonial India* and of course Ranajit Guha's *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency in Colonial India* as part of the writing of this school. I have, however, omitted David Hardiman's article in *Subaltern Studies* I as well as his *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat* from consideration as part of the subaltern school, because I believe that neither of these two studies reflect the "subaltern" approach. (The complete references to these writings are given in the bibliography and will be given in the text as and when they are cited.)

[2] Ranajit Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India" in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I: Writings on South Asian History and Society*, Delhi, 1982, pp. 4–6.

[3] Gyanendra Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress in Uttar Pradesh, 1926–34: A Study in Imperfect Mobilisation*, Delhi, 1978, p. 217.

[4] *Ibid*., pp. 207–8. This is also echoed in Sumit Sarkar, *Modern India: 1885–1947*, Delhi, 1983, p. 183.

of mobilization and struggle on the people, led to a decline in the participation of many "subalterns" whose "autonomous" forms of struggle, which tended to be "more violent", and whose mobilization, which was horizontal, could not fit into the pattern of vertical mobilization and constitutional and non-violent forms of struggle that characterized the "élite" national movement.[5]

Unfortunately, the real "flesh and blood" peasants that form the subject of my story refuse to fit into the mould cast for them by the "subalternists". At no stage do we find them expressing the kind of reservations about the national movement that are expected of them. They appear to have been quite willing to be "vertically" mobilized by nationalists of all hues, Akalis, Gandhians or leftists; they seem to have adopted, without any "explosive situations", "élite" forms of struggle based on non-violence (see Chapter 9); and those of them that bravely defied the British in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–32 would surely have objected to the implied trivialization of their protest by it being described as the reaction of "hard-pressed apolitical men and women" to the "economic conditions" brought about by the Depression[6]—as they did show their resentment, even to their own well-loved leaders, in 1942, when they tried to keep them away from the powerful nationalist current that was surging through the country (see Chapter 6).

Indian peasants also refuse to furnish any evidence for the proposition that greater distance or "autonomy" from the "élite" anti-imperialist stream was a recipe for greater militancy or resistance to élite domination. By this logic, militant peasant struggles should have emerged, and with greater vehemence, in areas and among peasants who were outside the influence of "élite" anti-imperialist politics and the "élite" ideology of nationalism. But again, "real life" failed to copy theoretical mythology. On the contrary, a particularly striking feature of the political landscape was the considerable congruence of the lines that defined the boundaries of influence of the peasant movement and the national movement. Peasant struggles in the twentieth century, and especially after 1918, tended to emerge either along with and as part of the national struggle or in areas and among sections that had at one time or another felt the impact of the anti-imperialist struggles. Significantly, peasant movements were also usually unable to break through the same limits of space, religion, or class and caste that defined the boundaries of the anti-imperialist struggle. (This does not mean either that the peasant movements occupied all of the political space created by the national movement, or that they could not on occasion step outside that space—the generalization made here, like all generalizations in the social and human sciences, is meant to indicate the dominant trend.)

[5] Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", pp. 2, 4.
[6] Pandey, *The Ascendency of the Congress*, pp. 155–57.

This congruence between the areas shaded on the political map of twentieth-century colonial India by the peasant and national movements was linked to the fact that in most parts of the country it was the anti-imperialist movement that created the initial political space in which peasant movements emerged. By mobilizing the peasantry into anti-imperialist political action, it created a new political awareness and awakening among them which made them receptive to the more radical or "class"-oriented ideas of peasant organization and peasant struggles. This is so widely accepted by participants, contemporaries and later commentators that any substantiation is really redundant. To give just two examples: "Indian peasants ... became politicized in the wake of the nationalist movement. The general spirit of defiance of authority generated by the nationalist movement from 1920 onwards and Gandhi's charisma surely promoted the growth of peasant movement almost throughout the country".[7] "The various national revolutionary struggles led by Mahatma Gandhi and the national Congress in 1921, 1930–34 and 1940–43 have roused the Indian masses, particularly peasants as nothing else in recent centuries had done.... Naturally when we began to organise peasants, we found them already with their feet well planted on the modern plane of national consciousness and determination to beard the British Imperialism in its den through the new weapon of Satyagraha with confidence in their ability to win freedom. Our task was thus very much facilitated".[8]

The national movement also provided another crucial pre-requisite for organizing the peasantry into their own organizations and leading their struggles: political cadre and workers activated by the national movement were to form the cadre of peasant movements as well. The Non-Cooperation Movement at the all-India level and in Punjab the Akali Movement as well (which was enmeshed with the Non-Cooperation Movement) created a new generation of young political workers who fanned out to villages and many continued even after their withdrawal to work among the peasants as constructive workers and often became the agents for organizing peasant struggles (as in Bardoli or Midnapore). Others gravitated towards more radical politics and joined the Workers' and Peasants' parties, the NJBS and the like and went to the peasantry with their own new ideas. Similarly, the Civil Disobedience Movement drew a whole new generation of youth

[7] Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movements in India*, Calcutta, 1982, p. 28. Sunil Sen was a participant-leader of the Tebhaga Movement and is a recognized analyst of peasant protest.

[8] N.G. Ranga, *Revolutionary Peasants*, New Delhi, 1949, p. 54. N.G. Ranga, one of the most colourful personalities of Indian politics, returned from an Oxford education to work among the agricultural labourers and later the peasants in his native coastal Andhra in the early 1920s. He was a major inspiration in the founding of the All-India Kisan Sabha, apart from being deeply involved in nationalist politics from the early 1920s. He was also a recognized scholar and has written extensively on Indian peasants and their problems.

to itself and it was chiefly from among these that the new cadre of the Kisan Sabha Movement in the 1930s emerged. Quit India played a similar role, as did movements such as those of the Ghadar Party, the Akali Movement and the like.[9] In those areas and among those groups which remained outside the ambit of the anti-imperialist struggle, and where therefore there was both a lower level of political consciousness as well as a shortage of political cadre, the peasant movement also generally remained weak.

This is more than borne out by the example of Punjab. A marked feature of the political landscape, which is bound to hit any student of Punjab politics before Independence in the eye, was the continued concentration of the peasant movement in the pre-Independence era in central Punjab, its virtual absence in western Punjab and its negligible presence in south-eastern Punjab or present day Haryana. This was obviously not because the peasants of central Punjab were more depressed in their conditions of existence than peasants elsewhere. On the contrary, peasants in western Punjab, a region dominated by big Muslim landlords, were mostly tenants-at-will who were certainly worse off than the self-cultivating peasants of central Punjab and as oppressed and exploited as any in the country, while much of the south-eastern region was almost chronically a victim of drought, famine and the like and its peasantry led an extremely precarious and insecure existence. One is also immediately struck by the fact that it was not only the peasant movement which was concentrated primarily in central Punjab, the rural base of the broad anti-imperialist movement also conformed to this regional pattern: it was the strongest in central Punjab, non-existent in western Punjab and weak in south-eastern Punjab.[10] That this was not a mere coincidence and that there was a deeper connection between these two phenomena was fully visible to contemporaries, as shown by the responses of some of the Communist leaders whom we questioned on this aspect—on the subject of the inability of the Communists to organize the peasantry in areas other than central Punjab.

The Communist leaders repeatedly pointed to the importance of the anti-imperialist movement and especially the Akali Movement in mobilizing

[9] To list just a few of the well-known names of radical leaders who emerged via these movements: Bhagat Singh and most of his comrades, P. Sundarayya, A.K. Gopalan, Keralyeean, Ravi Narayan Reddy, Sahajanand Saraswati, Karyanand Sharma, Biswanath Mukherjee, Kamalashankar Pandey, N.G. Gore, Nana Patil, Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, Jagir Singh Joga, Sohan Singh Josh and Sohan Singh Bhakna.

[10] Peasant leaders were very conscious of this. Interviews with many, including H.S. Surjeet, Sri Ram Sharma, Jagir Singh Joga, Dalip Singh Tapiala, Chhajju Mal Vaid, Jagjit Singh Anand, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri. As Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri pointed out: "Communist influence was in the peasant movement in Central Punjab and in parts of the colonies and mainly among the Sikh peasantry. Unionist party's influence was weak among the Sikh peasantry and in the towns and strongest among the Muslim peasantry, quite strong in Haryana, though here the Congress influence was also there" (interview).

the primarily Sikh peasantry of central Punjab, in breaking its political apathy and producing a general political awakening.[11] These movements also threw up an array of political workers or cadre and it was these already politicized elements who were later attracted towards the left and peasant movements and became its cadre. In the initial stages in the late 1920s, and even in the 1930s, a disproportionately large share of the leadership of the peasant movement was provided by Ghadar Party veterans—known affectionately as Ghadri Babas—as well as by the Ghadar/Kirti Party activists, whose nationalism was so strong that their socialism remained suspect in the eyes of their CPI comrades for many years.[12] Similarly, the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–32 also threw up a new generation of political workers, as did the NJBS, led by Bhagat Singh. This is not to suggest that the left movement or *kisan* movement did not attract any new cadre, but that the initial base and hard core of leadership as well as cadre were all provided by those who had entered politics via the anti-imperialist movement.

The Communist leaders also pointed out that their main problem in reaching out to the Muslim peasantry of west Punjab was that of shortage of local Muslim cadre and lack of any political links or contacts in the villages, without which it was impossible to approach the peasants. This in turn was a result of the fact that these areas had been untouched by any political movement, the peasant masses had never been part of the anti-imperialist movement and therefore there were no political workers or cadre who could be attracted towards the Communist movement and provide it with an initial foothold among the peasantry.

In fact, the degree of unanimity on this question among all our witnesses is unmatched by any other issue. I cite next a few examples from responses during interviews to this question. Harkishen Singh Surjeet agreed that it was the lack of influence of the national movement on Muslims that led to the shortage of Muslim cadre which in turn acted as a major constraint on mobilization of Muslim tenants in western Punjab and the canal colonies. He pointed out that when the peasant movement was sought to be extended into the canal colony areas of Nili Bar/Montgomery in 1938, though 50 per cent of the tenants were Muslim, the movement was based primarily on

[11] Interviews with Baba Bachhitar Singh, Jagir Singh Joga, G.S. Randhawa, Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, H.S. Surjeet, Jagjit Singh Anand and many others. Baba Bachhitar Singh and Jagir Singh Joga had themselves joined politics during the Akali Movement, along with most other Patiala leaders. Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri also pointed out that his family had been very active in the Akali Movement and this was an important political influence on him, though he came straight to left politics (in the late 1930s).

[12] Bhagat Singh Bilga, who came from the Ghadar/Kirti stream, said: "There was a view against us that our communism was 'different'. It was not of a different kind, but it was also anti-British" (interview).

the non-Muslim tenants who belonged to the Rai Sikh and Kamboh castes. This was because Hindus and Sikhs were already affected by the national movement and there were cadre available from among them, including at the local leve1.[13] Jagjit Singh Anand too commented on the fact that the influence of the peasant movement did not extend to the Muslim belt in west Punjab. "That can be explained—actually the national movement itself was confined mostly to the central districts of Punjab", he said. He went on to elaborate at length on how the general consciousness among the masses was brought about by the national movement, in which he included the Akalis, the Ghadar/Kirti Movement, etc.[14] But the best and most succint formulation on this was made by Jagir Singh Joga, the legendary leader of Patiala who began his political career as a young school student on a visit to Amritsar during the Non-Cooperation Movement and then went all the way through the Akali, Praja Mandal, and *Muzara* movements, as well as through the Lal Communist Party and later returned to the CPI to continue till the end of his life to lead the Kisan Sabha in Punjab.

To quote:

> The cadre emerges from a political movement ... and among the Muslims, there had been no movement at all. The national movement was also very weak among them. *And where there has been no national movement, the question of Communists, of a Communist movement does not arise at all.* [This is because] the *people were backward, not aware, not politically conscious, Communists on their own cannot break this. Only nationalism could bring awareness, break this barrier. Communists could not do this on their own, without nationalism.*[15]

If this was the reality, that the Communists, on their own, with all the theoretical understanding of class struggle and class structure and all their commitment to the cause of the peasantry, were unable to break through the limits defined by the spread of the anti-imperialist movement, does it not raise important questions of theory, of the possibly organic relationship between the peasant movements and the national movement and even the

[13] Interview.

[14] Interview.

[15] To continue in Jagir Singh Joga's words: "The cadre emerges from a political movement, of which some goes to Congress, some to us, and some which comes to us goes back. We did not have much cadre and the movement could only progress slowly". To the question: "Did you have discussions in the Kisan Sabha about spreading the movement to west Punjab?", he replied: "Yes, we did. We tried to attract as much Muslim cadre as possible, but without success. The movement in the Nili Bar Colony was also confined to the non-Muslim tenants, who were either Rai Sikhs or Kambohs" (Interview). Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri also confirmed that the tenants in the movement in the Nili Bar Colony were non-Muslims—Rai Sikhs, Kambohs and Ods and that this area was closer to Lahore and there were already political contacts in the area with Congressmen and this made the task easier (interview). Also interviews with Chhajju Mal Vaid, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, Dalip Singh Tapiala, and Master Hari Singh.

left and national movements, of the possibility that, in the absence of a general political consciousness or political awakening, even the most radical economic programme could not mobilize the masses, in fact it could not even be reached to them?

Nationalism as Ideology

Why did Jagir Singh Joga, a Communist peasant leader, who himself came from a peasant background and lived in his village his whole life, say to me with such conviction: "Where there has been no national movement, the question of Communists, of a Communist movement does not arise at all.... Only nationalism could bring awareness, break this barrier [of backwardness]?" The answer lies in the specificity of the colonial situation. (Joga is obviously not generalizing for the whole world, for all situations.) *For a colonial people*, nationalism becomes a powerful, almost elemental urge—its appeal is akin to, and can perhaps be matched only by, religion and not by ideologies of class struggle, no matter how well-formulated and coherent they may appear. Certainly, the ideology of class or economic struggle had no chance of success if it ranged itself against nationalism.

Each age, each epoch in the history of a people has its own dominant thrust—or, in Marxist terminology, its own central or primary contradiction. Only an ideology and movement that expresses that dominant thrust or primary contradiction is capable of moving people into political action on a mass scale for social transformation. Nationalism, because it expresses this dominant thrust of a colonial society, because it expresses and because it alone expresses the deeply-felt experiences of cultural humiliation and marginalization, economic exploitation and political subordination that are an inevitable part of the colonial interaction, is the only ideology that acquires this privileged position in the colonial epoch. It is, in Bipan Chandra's evocative phrase, "a prime mover of history".[16] If colonialism is seen, in the words of one of the foremost nationalist Marxist revolutionaries of our time, Amilcar Cabral, as "a denial of ... [the] historical process" of a people, then nationalism—its opposite, its "other"—becomes the vehicle for "the regaining of the historical personality of that people ... their return to history through the destruction of the imperial domination to which they were subjected". Cabral, in fact, goes so far as to say that in colonial conditions, class struggle itself takes the form of the national liberation struggle that is fought by the "nation class".[17]

[16] Bipan Chandra, *Indian National Movement: The Long Term Dynamics*, New Delhi, 1988, p. 9.
[17] Amilcar Cabral, *Unity and Struggle*, London, 1980, pp. 130, 133.

I have stated earlier that religion was the only possible competitor to nationalism. It is arguable, however, that in a colonial society even religion—which is a centuries-old ideological formation that has provided to the mass of people one of the major ways of making sense of the world in which they live—may not have been sufficient. Even when Jinnah gave the call that religion was in danger, as in 1946–47, if it had not been articulated by the Muslim League into a political discourse of which nationalism was also a major constituent, it may not have succeeded. It can be argued that even communalism, to become a mass force, especially among the peasants, needed the crutch of nationalism. After all, the Muslim League, when it actually succeeded in reaching out in the 1940s into the countryside in many parts of the country, had to recruit nationalism as its aide by demanding Pakistan—an independent Muslim state—and could not just continue demanding protection of Muslims in a colonial India ruled by Great Britain, as it had demanded earlier. Similarly, the Hindu Mahasabha failed to become a mass force during the national movement when it pitted itself against the Indian National Congress, the leading party of the national movement.[18] On the other hand, the recent runaway growth of the Hindu communal forces has much to do with the projection of their religion-based communal politics as symbolic of the assertion of "Hindu" nationalism.

I might also advance the hypothesis that it appears that for people to engage in a struggle that requires immense sacrifice and for them to be able to sustain this struggle over a prolonged period of time (as distinct from engaging in short-lived bursts of revolt or acts of desperation), what is required is a movement with an ideology that has a large vision, a big ideal—this is, after all, one reason why revolts are inspired by millenarian ideologies. Only such a vision can inspire people and sustain them in their determination.[19] And the Indian national movement did offer such a vision and an inspiring ideology. Communists could not hope to substitute this with calls for class or economic struggles, which is what they tried to do, though most often only in theory and mercifully less often in practice. They at least needed to encapsulate these calls within a larger vision of an egalitarian system, of socialism representing a new kind of society. In India, however, Communists often reduced the socialist ideal in their practice to the

[18] For a full-length study of communalism in colonial India, as well as for the relationship between communalism and nationalism, see Bipan Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1984. Also see his three essays on communalism in Bipan Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, New Delhi, 1988, Chapters 31, 32, 33.

[19] To quote Bipan Chandra: "Ideology and ideological preparation are important in any form of popular, mass-based struggle ... [because] active opposition involving immense sacrifice cannot be offered only on the basis of exploitation or a sense or knowledge of exploitation. It requires strong, very strong ideological commitment." Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, pp. 8–9.

doctrine of struggle for economic demands—perhaps one reason for this was that they were weaned on what Bipan Chandra has called Stalin–Marxism, a particularly reductionist and mechanistic variety of Marxism. However, it is not as if, had they successfully projected the socialist ideal, it could have replaced the nationalist vision as the prime mobilizing force in colonial India—it could have only allied with nationalism and left its stamp on it in the hope of a better tomorrow—after Independence. That Communists registered the successes they did was because in practice—for long periods of time, as during 1927–29, 1935–39, and even to an extent during 1940–41—they functioned as good nationalists and fully identified with the ideology of nationalism to establish their presence among the people in general and peasants in particular.

For Punjab, for example, the oral testimony of many of the left-wing leaders bears this out in ample measure. After all, these activists had talked, like other nationalists, about the drain of wealth from India to Britain, of the need to throw out the British; they were, like others, members of the Congress and like others, and often even more than others, office bearers of the Congress in their areas of influence.

The following examples from some of the interviews conducted for this study will corroborate this. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, the present general secretary of the Communist Party of India (Marxist), who was a major grass-roots level organizer of the peasant movement from about 1935, while discussing the ideology of the peasant movement, said: "The question is [that] everything was done for the struggle against imperialism. So that is why all the propaganda, even the mass organization, [the] issues which were being posed, everything was linked with imperialism.... Government [was] also a foreign government. That is why political propaganda was inherent. The conferences [were] not the type of trade union conferences which [are] being held today, mainly on the basis of economic demands. Everywhere it [was] connected with the political view". Ujagar Singh Bilga, who was a grass roots peasant organizer since the late 1920s and had worked in many parts of the province, also said that their refrain was that "our problems cannot be solved till we throw out the British". Bhagat Singh Bilga, one of the prominent Ghadar/Kirti leaders, echoed the same: "The planned kisan movement thus brought a national awakening among the kisans".

Wadhawa Ram, the son of a poor tenant-at-will who sacrificed his job as a *patwari* to become one of the major organizers of the tenants in the colony areas of Nili Bar/Montgomery/Multan, said that "in the villages we, [that is, the Communist peasant activists] were the Congress. Even if we didn't claim it, the people thought we were Congressmen. Nobody knew the name of Communists, but the Congress was a big party. Even where our influence was strong, we were known as Kisan workers, but not as Communists". Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, another important Communist leader, also

emphasized the close identity between nationalism, the national movement and the peasant movement: "Till 1942, there was no demarcation between us and the Congress. At the village level, we were known as Congressmen. In fact, we made more sacrifices for the Congress cause than the traditional Congressmen. The Congress flag we considered our flag—the flag of anti-imperialism. We defended the flag more avidly than them. *The main current of politics was anti-imperialism and Congress was the main symbol of this and all anti-imperialist currents had to work within it*". Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, a peasant organizer of Amritsar District, recounted at length how he would, in his speeches before peasant audiences, reproduce the standard nationalist critique of British rule, dwell on the drain of wealth from India to England, describe India as the golden bird (*sone ki chirya*) that was fleeced and say that if only we could retain this wealth here we could have more development and become prosperous.[20]

The Communist leaders of the peasants appeared before their audience in their nationalist or Congress incarnation also because the ideology and programme of anti-imperialist nationalism provided a basis, a focus, a rallying point around which different sections and strata of a fairly differentiated peasantry could be united. It may not be too rash to advance the hypothesis that, given the fact of deep economic and social divisions within the peasantry,[21] this was perhaps the only ideology and programme that could, in the given context, form the basis of common action and common organization of different sections of peasants.[22] The only other possibility, and one that was explored by the Unionist party in Punjab especially by Chhotu Ram and to some extent by the Krishak Praja Party in Bengal, was of mobilizing the peasants around an ideology of anti-urbanism, or ruralism, which may even sometimes, given the necessary popular pressure, acquire peasantist overtones. But such ideologies were, at least in the given historical context and perhaps are at all times, in spite of their

[20] Many others made the same point in different ways. For example, see interviews with Chain Singh Chain, Ram Singh Majitha, and Dalip Singh Tapiala. See also Chapters 3 and 4.

[21] Many scholars have noted the difficulties caused by sharp class divisions within the peasantry for the task of organizing a common struggle. See, for example, B.B. Chaudhuri, "Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar: 1919–39", and Kathleen Gough, "Peasant Resistance and Revolt in South India", in A.R. Desai (ed.). *Peasant Struggles in India*, New Delhi, 1979, especially pp. 369 and 723.

[22] This difficulty in uniting different classes, especially sections of the landowning peasantry with agricultural labourers, in a common struggle has been experienced more sharply since Independence once anti-imperialist nationalism could no longer fulfill the same function and also once agricultural labourers organizations emerged as an important constituent—which they were not in the pre-Independence days. It is possible to argue that just as these conflicting class demands could not be subsumed in a single movement in the pre-Independence days without a wider ideological orientation in the direction of anti-imperialism, similarly they cannot be incorporated today without a longer-term vision of national societal development.

apparent pro-peasant bias, ultimately reactionary. In the specific context of colonial India, they were successfully incorporated into the imperialist ideological discourse because their anti-urban emphasis helped, as in the case of the Unionists in Punjab, to blunt the anti-landlord (landlords being rural and not urban elements) and pro-nationalist (nationalists being identified as urban and the national movement as an urban dominated movement) edge of the emerging peasant movement (see Chapter 5, Section III). In the case of the Krishak Praja Party, which retained its anti-zamindari edge, the pro-nationalist potential of the peasant movement was blunted. Of course, both in the case of the Unionists in Punjab and the Krishak Praja Party in Bengal these ideologies were also happily married with communal and semi-communal and casteist ideologies which made it even easier for them to become part of the imperialist discourse.[23]

It would, then, seem that anti-imperialism was the only historically appropriate progressive ideology which could form the basis of unity and common struggle of the different strata of a peasantry that was otherwise divided not only on the basis of caste, religion, language but also increasingly differentiated at the economic or class plane as well. It is not surprising that, in practice, even the left-led peasant organizations, the All-India Kisan Sabha and its numerous provincial wings, including the Punjab Kisan Committee, functioned on the basis of this understanding—anti-imperialism was a crucial component of the ideology which was transmitted by the massive propaganda and organizational efforts of Kisan Sabha activists in Punjab and other parts of the country in the 1930s and 40s. (See Chapters 3, 4 and 5).

And, as in the case of the Indian national movement which could not be conciliated even in its mild, moderate phase,[24] this clear-cut anti-imperialist ideology made it difficult for the colonial authorities to either conciliate or co-opt the peasant movement from the 1920s onward. Conciliation had been possible in the case of the nineteenth-century peasant movements such as the Indigo Revolt, the Pabna Uprising and the Deccan Riots by conceding much of their demands.[25] Further, it was this anti-imperialist ideology which made it possible for the peasant movement in Punjab to demarcate itself from the Unionists, especially when Chhotu Ram was in a militant mood and raised demands and talked a language which sounded very similar to that of the Kisan Sabha activists. The one way in which the Kisan cadre could prevent their movement from being usurped by him was by

[23] For the Unionists in Punjab, see also Chapter 1 above, and Prem Chowdhry, *Punjab Politics: The Role of Sir Chhotu Ram* and for the Krishak Praja Party in Bengal, see Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movements in India*, pp. 53–54, and Chandra, *Communalism in Modern India*, pp. 84, 87.

[24] Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, p. 8.

[25] *Ibid*., p. 8, footnote 3.

constantly reminding the peasants of his pro-British politics—and their own anti-imperialism.[26]

I may clarify that the argument does not hinge on whether this modern nationalist political consciousness reached the peasantry through the organizational network of the Indian National Congress or through numerous substitutes such as the Akali Movement in British Punjab and the Punjab princely states during its anti-imperialist phase from 1920–25, the Andhra Mahasabha in Hyderabad State, the numerous Praja Mandals in the Indian states, N.G. Ranga in coastal Andhra from the 1920s, Swami Sahajanand in Bihar till the late 1930s and Communist, Congress Socialist and other leaders and cadre of the Kisan Sabha Movement in various parts of the country, including Punjab. After all, in China it was primarily the Communist Party that took this consciousness to the peasantry. I am referring to modern nationalist ideology and politics in general and not to the specific organizational form through which it was disseminated at various local levels. However, insofar as the Indian National Congress was the main organizational form—on a national, all-India plane—of the Indian national movement, a primary role was played in this process by it and the movements it launched, as well as by its leaders, especially Gandhiji.

The National Movement Among the Peasants

The Indian National Congress was able to occupy and maintain its leading—though by no means monopolistic—position as the mass—and not "élite" or "bourgeois"—party of Indian nationalism not because its was the loudest or most strident among the nationalist "voices". Nor did it reach this position from day one—it acquired it gradually, over time, through trial and error, through an accretion of accumulated experience and wisdom of many generations of nationalists. This is evident from the fact that it was able to begin to reach out to the peasants *on a mass national scale* only after 1918, after it had developed the following:

(*a*) A coherent, modern anti-imperialist ideology based on a full-fledged critique of colonialism and especially its ramifications on the peasantry

[26] See Chapter 5, Section III, above. Harkishen Singh Surjeet says this was the big difference in perceptions of Unionists between peasants of central Punjab and other areas: the peasants of central Punjab saw them as pro-British, elsewhere they were seen as pro-peasant (interview). Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri also asserts that the Sikh peasants of central Punjab were conscious that Unionists were pro-imperialist in the larger context, even though they may pass some pro-peasant legislation (interview).

and agricultural underdevelopment[27], which could give coherence to and provide a political and ideological rationale for the spontaneous anti-British sentiments that the peasantry had expressed inchoately in its earlier anti-British protests.[28]

(*b*) A viable strategy for the overthrow of the colonial structure based on a complex understanding of the colonial state, a strategy based on a full acceptance of the necessity for modern politics and organization; thus performing a task that earlier resistance movements, including the revolt of 1857, despite their undoubted heroism, had failed to perform—as evidenced by their resort to strategies and forms of struggle that were continuations of earlier pre-modern, non-hegemonic, forms of resistance[29] and their consequent inability to provide a continuing line of leadership, long-lasting organizational structures and sustained resistance necessary to undermine the foundations of the modern colonial state.

(*c*) Viable techniques and methods of mass politics, a mass-oriented political style and organization, as well as a language and idiom that could make sense to the mass of the people, especially the peasants.

While the critique of colonialism which formed the kernel around which the ideology of anti-imperialism coalesced had been developed by the Moderates or early nationalists, and the strategy of hegemonic struggle was initiated by the Moderates, furthered by the Extremists and given its full shape by Gandhiji,[30] the third element—the evolving of a whole technique of political action that could not be effective in the absence of its adoption by large numbers of people, the insistence on non-violence which ensured that no short-cuts by way of non-mass-based techniques such as terrorism or *coup d'etat* in the name of armed struggle were possible, all of which ensured that once these methods were adopted, the masses would have to be an integral part of the movement, the evocation of symbols and the use of a political language and idiom that could make sense to the peasants and make their ethos its own—was very largely Gandhiji's

[27] The early nationalists or Moderates took up the issues of land revenue, forest laws, irrigation and agricultural development. They also showed how underdevelopment, leading to the poverty of the peasant, to famines and food scarcity, was a consequence of British colonialism. See Bipan Chandra, *The Rise and Growth of Economic Nationalism*, New Delhi, 1966.

[28] For a brief overview of peasant protests in the nineteenth century, see Bipan Chandra, "Civil Rebellions and Tribal Uprisings", and "Peasant Movements and Uprisings after 1857", in Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Chapters 2 and 3.

[29] For a full discussion of forms of struggle, the difference between hegemonic and non-hegemonic, etc., see Chapter 9, Section I.

[30] See Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, p. 16 and Bipan Chandra, "Elements of Continuity and Change in the Early Nationalist Activity", in Bipan Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1979.

contribution.[31] Therefore, it was only after Gandhiji had put his stamp on nationalist politics that the peasants, too, made it their own on a mass, unprecedented scale. And it was with the aid of this national movement, and its associated movements, that large sections of Indian peasants stepped out of the groove of traditional politics,[32] shed their fear of authority and took the first, sometimes hesitant, and sometimes bold, steps towards their own empowerment.

Thus, while the national movement from the very beginning reflected in its ideology as well as to a large extent in its programme the anti-imperialist interests of the peasantry, it is from 1918 onwards, when the peasantry actively began to participate in the national movement, that the real historical relationship between the two evolved. Further, after this date, even those peasant struggles which were not launched as part of the major nationalist struggles or under the Congress organizational banner were in many ways an integral part of the anti-imperialist movement. It is both the extent and nature or character of this evolving relationship between the national movement and the peasantry and peasant movements that forms the subject of the following discussion.

The Extent of the Relationship

This issue can be discussed in two parts: (*a*) the extent of peasant participation in the national movement and especially in the major nationalist struggles, (*b*) the extent of integration between the peasant movements and the national movement. However, I wish to emphasize that I refuse to divide the political life of peasants into neat compartments and fall into the conventional trap of seeing peasant involvement in the national or anti-imperialist movement and peasant participation in peasant movements, or what are often called their 'own struggles', as two separate and separable processes. In real life, the two processes were so intertwined that it

[31] What distinguished the Moderates and Extremists and both of them from Gandhiji and the later nationalists was not the desire to involve the masses, including the peasantry, in the national movement, but their ability to do so and their political methods. See *Ibid*.

[32] This does not mean that they gave up completely and immediately their older forms of political expression, that they did not bring with them many traditional forms on to the modern political terrain, or that the modern trends did not try to incorporate their idiom and dramatic language into their own structure. Lokmanya Tilak and other Extremist leaders, especially of the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, and Gandhiji did try to do this in many ways. For the efforts made by the nationalist intelligentsia in the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, see Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal, 1903–8*, New Delhi, 1973. See also Chapter 9, Section I in this Volume.

would be difficult to grasp them without a simultaneous grasp on their interrelationships. Can it be otherwise, when the leaders who rallied the peasants to the cause of nationalism also organized them into *Kisan Sabhas*, when the speech they heard at a meeting talked simultaneously of the drain of wealth and the need to throw out the British and the heavy burden of land revenue, when they responded to calls to protest because they were in a sullen mood due to the fall in prices of produce and also because they wanted their country to be free, when the activist who came cycling down the dusty path into the village had two sets of membership forms in his hand, one of the Congress and the other of the Kisan Sabha and he collected 5 annas in all, 4 annas for one and one anna for the other? The connections were more than apparent to the participants—why else would the veteran Communist leader, Master Hari Singh, use the title *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle* for what is the first major chronicle of the peasant movement in colonial Punjab and which reflects not only his own understanding but that of many of his comrades who contributed by sending in a lot of information as well as by writing parts of the book?

Conventional wisdom, alas, is not always current fashion. And those of us who find some of the fashionable trends that surround us not to our taste, are obliged, if only to guard ourselves against the charge of being dowdy and out-dated, to explain why we refuse to fall in step. In essence, the reason why we cannot fall in line is simple: the historical evidence does not fall in line. And for those of us who have not yet come round to the post-modernist view that reality exists only in the eye of the beholder and one version of reality is as valid as the next, historical evidence continues to retain its primacy despite all the attempts at its deconstruction and construction.

The Extent of Participation

The growing participation of all strata of the peasantry in the national movement and especially in the major national struggles is, as stated earlier, accepted by all writers, including the traditional Marxists, and the discussion is therefore usually about the precise extent and form of the participation, its regional variation, the reasons for participation, etc. The "subalternists" have, however, as stated earlier, questioned this notion and asserted that, "on the contrary ... as the organisation and strength of the Congress increased and the scale of its campaigns widened, the social depth of the movement actually diminished.... The numbers involved in its campaigns,

and even the figures of its membership generally increased, but the 'catchment area' became narrower".[33]

The assertion is based, as mentioned earlier, on the notion that the very extension of Congress organization led to a decline in the participation of many subalterns, whose "autonomous" forms of struggle could not fit into the pattern of constitutional and non-violent forms of struggles that characterized the "élite" national movement.[34]

It is then asserted that Gandhian movements, at least the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–32[35] and the first, "élite" phase of the Quit India Movement,[36] were primarily based on rich and upper caste rural landowning strata and that the poor and low caste peasants as well as tribals remained outside their ambit. Any evidence to the contrary is either ignored[37] or sought to be explained away by any one or more of the following arguments.

[33] Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 207–8. Also see Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 290–91. One of Pandey's arguments against the notion of growing and widespread mass involvement in the national movement is that "if this picture were true it would be difficult to explain the want of mass participation in the institutional politics of India and Pakistan.... Why is there so little evidence of it in the politics of the Congress after that date?" However, the opening lines of his own Preface show the weakness of his argument. For, referring to the post emergency elections of 1977 which swept Indira Gandhi out of power, he says: "Since this work went to press momentous political events have taken place in India. In a historic election the people have overthrown a growing dictatorship. 'We have won', anonymous men and women declared in Delhi. And crowds of them demonstrated at the houses of leaders who were for one reason or another reluctant to enter the new cabinet, insisting that these leaders either take up their posts in the government or else resign their seats and see if they win a re-election". Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. vii, 2. Surely these lines indicate the existence of mass participation in what Pandey calls "institutional politics" and not the want of such participation. Perhaps, then, given his own perception of these "momentous political events", he needs to re-think the nature of mass participation in the movement.

[34] See Guha "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India".

[35] Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 207–8. Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 290–91.

[36] Henningham talks of the Quit India revolt's "dual quality". "One insurgency was an élite nationalist uprising of the high caste rich peasants and small landlords who dominated the Congress. The other insurgency was a subaltern rebellion in which initiative belonged to the poor, low caste people of the region". Stephen Henningham, "Quit India in Bihar and Eastern United Provinces: The Dual Revolt", in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies II: Writings on South Asian History and Politics*, Delhi, 1983, p. 137.

[37] Pandey's own evidence, which stays neatly out of his generalizations, is as follows: "A UP government survey in early 1932 indicated that of the 2004 Civil Disobedience prisoners held in the five gaols surveyed, 1397 were 'petty servants or labourers', 145 shopkeepers, 53 students and the remaining 408 'a sprinkling of beggars' and people in miscellaneous occupations'.... The vast majority of *Satyagrahis* in the early 1930s came from the villages. Even more significant is the fact that they represented a broad spectrum of rural society, excluding only its uppermost segments. The last category in the 1932 official survey mentioned above was that of 'beggars' and people in 'miscellaneous occupations'. A large number of

One argument advanced is that the poorer sections were not motivated by nationalist sentiment but only by economic discontent.[38] Another argument is that even if large number of peasants, including the poor, the low-castes and the tribals did participate in the Congress-led national movements and in "official" Congressmen-led peasant movements, the credit for this goes not at all to the "élite" who "controlled" the movements from the "top"—the Gandhis and Nehrus and Patels and Prasads and perhaps the Krishna Pillais, Sundarayyas, Baba Sohan Singh Bhaknas, Achhar Singh Chhinas and Harkishen Singh Surjeets—but to the self-mobilization of the "subalterns" who spearheaded the movements from "below"—the Baba Ramachandras and the Madari Pasis and Ramchandra Rajus and the Swami Sahajanands and "non-official" or "irresponsible" Congressmen such as Kalka Prasad.[39]

Further, the credit goes not to the new emphasis placed by the Congress and Gandhi on evolving a new language and style of mass politics, new techniques of mass political organization and action, to the active propaganda efforts by thousands of grass-roots nationalists workers, but to that ingenious mode of communication invented by the peasantry and discovered by the subaltern historians—rumour. Rumours, it is argued, were what really mattered; and since, for example, rumours about what Gandhi said or wanted were so far removed from what he actually said or wanted the peasants to do, and since it was these rumours that provided the basis for the peasantry's militant actions, how can Gandhi be credited for those

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these are likely to have been artisans; weavers in particular were greatly influenced by the Congress's *khadi* programme. Small peddlers and hawkers, personal servants and other odd-job men also appear to have taken some part in the movement". Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 107–8.

[38] Pandey, for example, believes that "above all, the marked rural orientation of the Civil Disobedience Movement appears to have come about owing to its coincidence with the world Depression.... Economic conditions and the independent actions of hard-pressed 'apolitical' men and women did much to shape the course of one of the most important nationalist agitational campaigns and, consequently, of the movement in general." *Ibid.*, pp. 155–57. Also see Henningham, "Quit India in Bihar and Eastern United Provinces", p. 159.

[39] Pandey asserts that "the great accession of strength to the 'Congress' in Rae Bareli ... appears to have been largely the fruit of the labours of 'local militants' speaking in the Congress's name but not as 'responsible' Congressmen". "Rae Bareli's 'responsible' Congressmen and local militants worked along very different lines during the crucial months from March to July 1931...." One wonders where he would place the actions of Gandhi, among those of the "irresponsible" Congressmen, or with the "militants"! For, just one page earlier, he also records the impact of Gandhi's manifesto to the kisans! To quote: "Gandhi's Manifesto of May publicized widely in the district (Rae Bareli), had contributed to the general turbulence. The government noted an increase in 'disguised no-rent propaganda' and consequently of tension in rural areas. 'Matters are coming to a head', it declared, "owing to the greater pressure exerted by the Congress'." Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 180, 181–82.

actions?[40] The rumours and the consequent actions are therefore proof of the "autonomous" existence of the "subaltern" anti-imperialist stream, a stream so clear and large that it has only been missed because of the "élite blinkers" of all previous historiography.[41]

The "subalternists", no doubt because of their enthusiasm at all these new discoveries, forget to ask a very important question: why were these rumours, however far removed they were from the "sordid" Gandhian reality, all spread in the name of Gandhiji? Why was the sanction of his name necessary to make these rumours do their "autonomous" work? Why was it Gandhiji who was supposed to have the power to break through multiple locks or take on the form of a house-fly to flee from jail.[42] There were many others, more holy and saintly than Gandhi, who stalked the Indian countryside and who were far closer to the peasants and tribals in their language, manners, dress than Gandhi could ever become. Why did he become the symbol, why did his name have to be invoked, even for activities which were so contrary to his own convictions? The answer provided by Sumit Sarkar, that peasants needed to believe in a "saviour from above", still does not explain why Gandhi, and not other more familiar "saviors", was chosen for that role.[43] Can this be explained in any other way but that for the peasantry who looted bazaars in his name and for the tribals who distilled liquor on his "orders", Gandhi had become the symbol of their defiance and struggle against foreign rule? Can it be denied that in their consciousness (though not in the consciousness of those who claim to write about their consciousness) they clearly linked their "autonomous" subaltern actions to the call of this leader from the "top"? Even if this was a delusion on their part, and they were in fact giving credit where none was due, the fact remains that they at least felt the necessity to believe that they acted at his behest. Their new millennium was identified, not without significance, as "Gandhi Raj". In all this there is perhaps a meaning, which is neatly missed by those who wear anti-nationalist, anti-Congress, and anti-Gandhi "blinkers".

[40] See, for example, Pandey, "Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism: The Peasant Movement in Awadh, 1919–1922", in Guha, *Subaltern Studies I*, pp. 163–65; Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 181; Shahid Amin, "Gandhi as Mahatma: Gorakhpur District, Eastern U.P., 1921–22", in Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies III*, Delhi, 1984, pp. 1–61.

[41] Guha, "*On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India*", p. 3.

[42] Interview with Wadhawa Ram.

[43] Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 182. Why were the peasants of Avadh, as Sarkar himself points out, "attributing their own achievements to him [Gandhi]", as in the case of restriction of *bedakhli* in Pratapgarh, and not even to Baba Ramchandra, who was a religious figure directly involved in the struggle against *bedakhli*? Why did it happen that, "repeatedly from 1922 onwards, (when) the Mahatma categorically ordered a retreat, the bulk of the masses would obey?" *Ibid*.

In their self-righteous anxiety to set right the historical record that has been so grossly manipulated by "élite" historiography,[44] they, in fact, end up with a completely distorted view—a romantic vision of a subaltern peasantry fighting its "autonomous", presumably revolutionary (because they were violent) battles, while the constitutionalist, legalist, "élite", "official" Congress carried on its cockfight for the loaves and fishes of office—except that once in a while, when the clamour for attention from its rebellious "subaltern" children became too loud and uncomfortable, it condescended to join the subalterns' rough games but only to hurriedly call halt when the children began to go "too far" and even win.

A good example of this is to be found in Pandey's writings. In his view, when the Congress did take pro-peasant positions, it did so because it was in some sense forced to do so, that is, its natural tendency was to avoid such a position. Thus, his explanation for Gandhi's "Manifesto to the Kisans" of the United Provinces (UP) in May 1931 which urged them to pay only 50 to 75 per cent of the rent due from them and to get against that payment a full discharge from their obligation for the current year's rent—the result of which manifesto was, in his own words, "to encourage the total non-payment of rent by tenants", "the Congress leadership itself ... not (being) unaware that this was the likely result"—is that "in the circumstances they (the Congress leadership) had to go at least that far", because "the prominence it had attained as the country's principal political party, and its oft-repeated claim to be the spokesman of the underdog, obliged the Congress to take a stand on every major question affecting any important section of the populace".[45] The tone is very clear: the Congress "had to go that far", was "obliged to take a stand"; it did so against its "real" inclinations and

[44] Sarkar urges the need for "a 'history from below', in which the tribal rebellion of Birsa Munda might find mention before the quarrels of Moderates and Extremists". *Modern India*, p. 43. The tone of this statement, which dismisses the differences between Moderates and Extremists over how best to push forward the national struggle against imperialism as "quarrels", is clearly one of dismissal of all that happens in the "élite" movement as less relevant to the history of modern India and Indian nationalism than the tribal rebellion of Birsa Munda. Also, the demand is not for a history that also includes tribal rebellions but for one in which Birsa Munda should find mention before the quarrels of "élite" politicians. One may well ask whether it is in fact necessary or even desirable that Birsa Munda get precedence over Moderates and Extremists in any discussion of the national movement. It is not the historian's fault that the "quarrels" of Moderates and Extremists had more important implications for modern Indian nationalism than the undoubtedly heroic struggle of Birsa Munda and his followers. Would Sumit Sarkar like to argue that the "quarrels" of the Mensheviks and the Bolsheviks, that is, theoretical debates within Marxism, be relegated to a lower position than the Kronsdat uprising? It is perhaps time that Indian historians recognized the significance of the debates that engaged their historical protagonists as being as important for the history of their own country as debates that engaged Russian revolutionaries or Chinese nationalists and Communists.

[45] Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 104–6.

tendencies. Subaltern historiography is at great pains to prove that "leaders" only responded to popular pressures, they did not create them. Sarkar too argues that this was true of Kheda, Champaran and even of the Non-cooperation and Civil Disobedience Movements.[46]

One can only remark that this is a very laboured argument indeed! Obviously, the existence of popular discontent and therefore of some degree of popular pressure and resistance is a necessary pre-condition for every movement, regardless of who assumes the leadership. It is a truism that no leader can create a movement out of thin air, in the absence of favourable objective conditions. And if this is the only purpose of the argument, one wonders why it is pushed with such avidity. If its purpose is to reduce the significance of the role of the leadership, it is clearly inadequate: for in almost every case cited, it was the intervention of the leadership that gave this discontent and initial resistance a more coherent political form and fashioned significant movements of protest out of what might have otherwise remained isolated and sporadic expressions of discontent. In fact, if the argument is correct, that leaders responded to popular pressures, then it only goes to show that leaders did what they were supposed to do as leaders, that is, respond to popular pressures, sentiments, needs and give them a more organized form and a more coherent focus. They would, in fact, be very poor leaders if they did not respond, as well as if they tried to create movements where no scope for them existed, if popular pressures and indications of a desire for a movement in terms of some local initiative were totally missing. In that case, they would very soon cease to be leaders!

One can do no better than quote Gandhiji himself at this point. In answer to a question from a colleague in 1947 as to why he did not create a situation favourable to a struggle, he said:[47]

> I have never created a situation in my life. I have one qualification which many of you do not possess. I can almost instinctively feel what is stirring in the heart of the masses. And when I feel that the forces of good are dimly stirring within, I seize upon them and build up a programme. And they respond. People say that I had created a situation; but I had done nothing except give a shape to what was already there. Today I see no sign of such a healthy feeling. And therefore I shall have to wait until the time comes.

On another occasion, he wrote:[48]

[46] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership in Late Colonial India: Perspectives and Problems of a History from Below*, Calcutta, 1983, p. 45.

[47] Cited in Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, p. 60.

[48] *Harijan*, 11 February 1939, *Collected Works of Mahatma Gandhi*, Vol. 68, p. 381, cited in Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, p. 59.

> Yet the awakening of millions does take time. It cannot be manufactured. It comes or seems to come mysteriously. National workers can merely hasten the process by anticipating the mass mind.

Gramsci, the Italian Marxist leader and theoretician, describing this process, termed it as "a matching of thrusts from below with orders from above".[49]

What the "subalternist" historians do not see is that the coming together of the national movement and the peasantry was an organic and dialectical process—the Congress, or at least large sections of it, with its experience of 20 years of moderate politics and of another decade or more of the Extremist efforts at reaching out to the people, had come to a point where it was ready to accept Gandhi's accent on mass-based politics. On the other hand, significant sections of the peasants, with their own accumulated experience of colonial exploitation as well as of the limitations of their earlier—sporadic and autonomous—anti-British revolts which they had fought with traditional ideologies and most often under traditional leadership, were ready for an ideology that provided a clearer understanding of their own existential experience of colonial exploitation and a movement that provided the opportunity to express their discontent in a more meaningful and effective manner. Therefore, neither the one nor the other, neither the national leadership nor the peasantry, was "autonomously" responsible for the process that took off around 1918, nor can the subsequent developments in this process be understood except in this dialectical fashion.

Through the 1920s and 1930s and 1940s, this process of the widening and deepening of peasant involvement in the anti-imperialist movement and of the growing sensitivity of an increasing number of nationalists—especially those influenced by Marxist and other left ideologies, from Bhagat Singh to Jai Prakash Narayan, from Bhagat Singh Bilga to Sahajanand to Nehru, from Baba Rur Singh Chuharchak to Nana Patil to P. Sundarrayya, from Jagir Singh Joga and Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri to Krishna Pillai and Bankim Mukherjee—to the needs and urges of the peasantry continued to be pushed forward. Sometimes, and in some places, reluctant nationalists were goaded on by militant peasants from below, at other times, and in other places, enthusiastic nationalists mobilized hitherto hesitant peasants "from above". Some peasants joined the national movement after hearing nationalist speeches, attending meetings or reading propaganda pamphlets or as a result of their growing respect for the Congress because of the selfless constructive work of grass-roots level Gandhian workers[50] or as a response to

[49] Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, London, 1971, p. 188, cited in Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, p. 56.

[50] Pandey's own evidence is proof of this: "Yet neither extreme poverty nor political naivete has ever been a sufficient condition for the rise of large-scale political movements. It has

calls to liberate their places of worship from the clutches of unscrupulous priests who were backed by the British, as in Punjab, others responded to rumours or orders from caste assemblies (though this form of mobilization tended to decline over time). The process was a complex one, but not so confusing or ambiguous that the unifying thread—the common desire of both the national movement and the peasantry to reach out to each other—is not visible. The unevenness of the desire was also not a peculiarity of one side. Some nationalists were keener than others to mix with the peasants and some peasants were keener than others to involve themselves with the nationalists. Therefore, the process was not one of linear progression, but one that was differential, had many breaks as well as spurts, but on the whole continued to move forward.

The "subalternists" problem is therefore that they are trying to answer a question to which there is no answer—because the question itself is wrong. They ask: who came first—the chicken or the egg? To whom should the prize go—the peasants or the nationalists? As a consequence, they fall into an error similar to that of some nationalist historians who tend to argue that the credit for Independence goes to Gandhi, Nehru, Patel and other leaders and underplay or ignore the role of the common people and the lower-level activists. In any case, the task of the historian is to analyse the historical process and not to hand out accolades or prizes to the historical characters.

But even Sarkar, who otherwise takes a far more balanced stand than many of the other "subaltern" writers, is prone to this habit, as is evident from the following statement: "Tilak has been occasionally hailed for anticipating Gandhi through his 1896–97 no-revenue campaign; the honour properly belongs much more to the peasantry whose traditional armoury included most of the weapons (collective non-payment, social boycott, migration) to be used under the Mahatma's leadership from the 1920s".[51] In our view, it would be far better to see these as forms of struggle which were the product of the long tradition of resistance of the Indian people and to simultaneously recognize the significance of the integration of these forms in the nationalist armoury by nationalist leaders sensitive to the needs

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taken a bold ideology and persistent propaganda to draw discontented men into open and extended political action. Congress propaganda and initiative undoubtedly played an important part in channelling disparate economic grievances, and perhaps a more general feeling of national discontent, into a non-violent anti-imperialist agitation." Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 75–76. But the evidence does not enter his framework. He also talks at length about the pamphlets distributed during 1931 in the United Provinces by the Congress. *Ibid.*, p. 97. Sarkar, too, recognizes the importance of constructive work, especially for building up "Congress hegemony over lower castes and untouchables". Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 230–31.

[51] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 23.

of mass struggle. This is what the Marxist historian Chesnaux does for China. He demonstrates how much of Chinese Communist strategy was influenced by and based on an understanding of the patterns of struggle adopted by the Chinese peasant rebellions through their long history. He refers especially to the practice of concentrating the armed resistance in the hilly border land between provinces rather than in the towns and to the peasant rebels' habit of invading the cities. The second, he argues, is what lay behind Lin Piao's famous strategy of encirclement of "the cities of the world". But he does not, on this basis, argue that, therefore, the contribution of the Communists to the formulation of this strategy was negligible and that the "honour" should go to the peasants. Rather, he emphasizes that "this strategy developed from the historical experience of the Chinese Communists and the policies which had brought them to power in 1949, after the fall of the great Kuomintang—controlled cities to peasant guerrillas", but that "at the same time the strategy had a more ancient heritage, and continued a pattern which had always been present in the struggles of Chinese peasants in the pre-industrial era".[52]

Again, Sarkar, while highlighting the limitations of pre-First World War popular movements, notes that they "were usually directed against the immediate Indian oppressor rather than the distant white superior, and so were not consciously or subjectively anti-imperialist". But in the later phase, when the precise focus is primarily on the distant white superior, he considers that as a limitation. The other limitation he notes is that they "were fairly widely scattered in space and time, and were extremely volatile, with class, caste and religious forms of articulation interpenetrating and passing over into each other with bewildering ease". Because of this, he feels that it is not possible to accept the "concept of peasant nationalism as a coherent alternative to élite patriotic ideologies and movements". Therefore, while he does argue that "popular unrest did anticipate much of middle-class nationalism in terms of issues and forms of struggle", it is clear that he is aware that it did not anticipate it in terms of ideology.[53] Consequently, the contribution of the so-called élite movement at the level of formation of a coherent anti-imperialist nationalist ideology remains crucial. And unless one is to relegate the role of ideology to the sidelines of history, one would have to acknowledge that to the extent that later popular movements became subjectively or consciously anti-imperialist, thus overcoming one crucial limitation of the earlier movements, this would have to be recognized clearly as a product of the linkage established with the national movement, the bearer of this ideology. This would then seriously question the notion of the "autonomy" of such movements, for if

[52] Jean Chesneaux, *Peasant Revolts in China*: *1840–1949*, London, 1973, pp. 68, 75–76.
[53] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 33.

their anti-imperialist ideology was not autonomous to them, what is the legitimacy of using such a category to define their character? Also, similarly, to the extent that the limitation of fragmentation, of the scattered nature of movements, was overcome in the later period, was not this, too, an achievement for which the supposedly "élite" organizations such as the Congress and the Kisan Sabha, were also responsible? And even in this latter process, did not the ideology of nationalism, which led to the consciousness of the need to have a nation-wide organization of the masses, play a crucial role?

Pandey, however, insists on seeing it as a one-way relationship. To quote: "it was the popular masses who brought an increased militancy and 'radicalism' to the Congress, rather than a militant and radical Congress which took politics to the people and armed them with the necessary initiatives for anti-imperialist struggle after 1917".[54] There is no room here even for the impact of radical left ideologies in the late 1920s on a significant section of the younger leadership of the Congress and also on the mass of the youth who were to constitute a major part of the cadre of the national movement during the Civil Disobedience Movement. This impact had been seen clearly in the formation of the Independence of India League, in the passing of the resolution for complete Independence in Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose's rising popularity among the youth as representatives of this new radical left strand. But Pandey has no room for what one might call the autonomous influence of ideology, even in explaining the radicalization of individuals and petty-bourgeois youth. Even their radicalism is only the result of the "autonomous" economic struggle of the masses. Again, in contrast to Pandey, Sarkar clearly sees that this radicalization was a result of left ideological influence on the movement. He refers to the "autonomous and powerful anti-landlord kisan movements of the early 1920s, of which the Darbhanga Raj agitation under Swami Vidyanand in 1919–29 and the Awadh awakening under Baba Ramachandra in 1920–21 are the best known.... Despite occasional militant outbursts and participation by the rural poor, these seem to have been essentially movements of the upper stratum of the tenantry, predominantly Bhumihar Brahman in Bihar and Kurmis and other intermediate castes in UP, with fairly limited objectives". He then contrasts these movements with the Kisan Sabha movement of the 1930s, which were "characterised by a conscious, alternative and more radical type of anti-imperialism integrally bound up with a vision of socio-economic change". The difference with the earlier movements lay not in the nature of the immediate aims, for "the Kisan Sabhas of 1930s would also fight often for limited aims, but the essential difference would be the existence by then of an overall perspective

[54] Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, p. 217.

of social transformation, brought by outsider intellectuals with a more or less socialist ideology, and crystallized in the demand for abolition of zamindari within a clear anti-imperialist framework". It is also significant that, in his view, the main impetus for this trend came not from within the "subaltern" movement, but "from within the national movement itself", that is from the "élite" anti-imperialist stream.[55] But, as elsewhere, he does not explore the implications of these positions for the whole "subaltern" framework.

The Extent of Integration Between Peasant Movements and the National Movement

The tendency among historians subscribing to the subaltern approach is to treat as "autonomous" all those movements, including the peasant movements, in which the organizational linkage with the Congress is not strong or clear or there are differences between some lower level and some higher level Congress leaders. Those movements whose beginning and end do not coincide exactly with that of the major Congress-led mass struggles, or movements which adopt forms of struggle, however briefly, that are not sanctioned by the "official" Congress, are also immediately cited as proof of the existence of an alternative, autonomous, "subaltern" stream of politics. The concepts of "autonomy" and "control" are pitted against each other, and any contact between peasants and "élites" which does not result in the latter "controlling" the movement, is dismissed as negligible in importance and proof of the basic autonomy of the "subalterns".[56]

The "subaltern" historians fall into this error at least partly because they tend to treat the "élite" national movement as synonymous with the Congress organizational network, forgetting that the national movement, though led by the Congress, was not synonymous with Congress organization but with nationalist influence or hegemony, in the extension of which the Congress played the major role. If a strictly organizational perspective is to

[55] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, pp. 53–55.

[56] See, for example, Sarkar's treatment of the no-revenue agitation in the Deccan in 1896–97. He notes that the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha under Tilak's leadership sent out agents "into the countryside to hold meetings and distribute pamphlets educating the peasant about his right to demand revenue remissions under the Famine Code in a year of scarcity, and some short-lived no-revenue combinations were started in Thana, Kolaba and Ratnagiri". But he asserts that "the basic autonomy of the peasant movement was revealed, however, both by the looting of grain-shops (which middle class nationalists of course had never advocated) and the continuation of popular resistance well after urban agitators had withdrawn and Tilak had been jailed on a different issue". Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 23.

be adopted, then Gandhi, who ceased to be even an ordinary Congress member from 1934 onwards, cannot be considered a part of the national movement or of the Congress. The Congress did seek to constantly extend its organization, but the objective of this effort was to extend nationalist hegemony and not Congress organizational hold in a narrow sense. Sarkar also expresses his doubt about whether "the Indian colonial middle class (read Congress) was able to supply (the) necessary ideology and organisation and thus, eventually, establish a full scale 'hegemony' (over the peasantry)".[57] One might comment that the hegemony of the national movement and the Congress over the peasantry, whether full-scale or not, was certainly greater than Bolshevik hegemony over the Russian peasantry in 1917. By all accounts, it was the Social Revolutionaries who were the leaders of the peasants. Should one therefore talk of two separate streams in the Russian revolution: the "élite" stream led by the urban-based Bolsheviks and the "autonomous" subaltern stream of the peasantry?

The fact, however, remains that increasingly, in the twentieth century, peasant movements, even when they were not launched as part of the major national struggles of 1919–22, 1930–32, or 1942, tended to be invariably integrated ideologically with the national movement, were inspired by nationalist example and ideology, and were often organizationally also linked with one or another group of Congress leadership, whether at the local or provincial or national level.

A good example of this process of the integration of the peasant movements with the national movement is the Kisan Sabha movement which began in the mid-1930s on the initiative of the Congress Socialist Party and the Communists, who in those years, together and along with individuals like Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhas Bose, constituted the left-wing of the Congress. The manifesto of the All-India Kisan Sabha adopted in 1936 stated that its aims were to be achieved and the tasks of organization, etc., accomplished through "active participation in the national struggle for independence".[58] N.G. Ranga, the first President of the All-India Kisan Sabha makes this explicit:

> all along the Andhra Kisan movement considered itself only as a projection of and an additional source of strength to the greater freedom movement and its organ the Indian National Congress and never did it dream of pursuing national political policies contrary to those of the National Congress itself. Hence my declaration, as the President of the Faizpore Session [the first session of the All-India Kisan Sabha], that the National

[57] *Ibid.*, pp. 34–35.
[58] B.B. Chaudhuri, "*Agrarian Movements*", p. 350.

> Congress should be our common forum in which all these organisations should meet, discuss, decide and cooperate for the achievement of our freedom under its leadership.[59]

The leaders, the cadre, as well as the ordinary members of the Kisan Sabha were almost always members of the Congress as well. In fact, Kisan Sabha activists, as stated earlier, were asked to simultaneously enrol Congress and Kisan Sabha members.

The intimate links between the peasant and national movements become clear when we recall that a vast majority of political activists who later gravitated towards the left and were active in the Kisan Sabha movement in the 1930s and even 1940s not only emerged out of one or the other stream of the anti-imperialist movement but continued for long years to be simultaneously leaders of the peasant movement and the national movement, members of the Communist or other left groups and the Congress. This becomes evident if we map the trajectory of their political careers. A few examples from Punjab in the form of brief biographies are given here to illustrate the process.

Jagir Singh Joga[60] recalled that the earliest political influence on him was of his father, who, as an emigrant in the United States of America (USA), had become an active member of the Ghadar Party and distributed copies of the *Ghadar* paper. His father had served a year in jail for the crime of being caught at Singapore with copies of the *Ghadar* in his baggage when he was returning to India. From early childhood, he said, he began learning from his father the plight to which India and her people had been reduced by the British rulers. When the Non-Cooperation Movement was going on, his school teacher, Karam Chand, arranged a "political education" trip to Lahore. He, along with five of his classmates, was taken to Bradlaugh Hall, the headquarters of the anti-imperialist movement, a venue used by all nationalist currents for holding their meetings. There they listened to a lecture by Principal Chhabil Das, a life member of the Servants of People Society set up by Lala Lajpat Rai, whose main task was the popularization of nationalist (and later left nationalist) ideas by writing pamphlets and tracts that used to be distributed for 1 anna or a little more, and give lectures explaining the basics of the nationalist, and later socialist, ideological framework to political workers. Following this, the very next day he and his classmates along with others, including four girl students from Lahore, picketed liquor shops and landed up in jail for one whole year. A life long political career had been launched.

[59] N.G. Ranga, *Revolutionary Peasants*, p. 70.

[60] The following account is based on interviews given by Joga, one to Shri Satyapal Dang, the CPI leader of Punjab, who very kindly gave me a copy, and the other to me.

On his release, Joga joined the Akali Movement, went in a *jatha* of 25 to the Bhai Phero Morcha in Lahore District, and was back again for another year to his new home—jail. After this, along with many others who grew disillusioned with the course of Akali politics after the anti-imperialist urge weakened after 1925, he chose the Praja Mandal founded in his native Patiala in 1928 as the main platform, under the leadership of Sewa Singh Thikriwala, who, too, had come out of he Akali Movement in its heyday in the early 1920s. Within the Praja Mandal, Joga from the beginning in the early 1930s identified strongly with the cause of the *muzaras* and over time, via the *Muzara* Movement as well as general left ideological influence, he gravitated towards the Communists. In 1946, he became president of the Patiala Riasati Praja Mandal, largely due to the support he received from non-Communist left leaders, such as Brish Bhan, against the non-left Praja Mandalists led by Seth Ram Nath, Giani Zail Singh, etc. It was only after integration with the new republic of India, when the Communists and non-Communists parted political company, that he started working under a purely "Communist" banner.

Thus, carrying forward his father's tradition of Ghadar, inspired by Gandhiji's non-cooperation as interpreted by Chhabil Das, and as arranged by his teacher Karam Chand, participating fully in the Akali *jathas* that set new standards of non-violent heroism, then helping to strike roots for the Praja Mandal which expressed the political aspirations of the people of Patiala, he went on to the *muzaras* struggling to regain their patrimony. He continued after that to be simultaneously a nationalist, a democrat seeking to place curbs on the Maharaja's arbitrariness and a Communist leading the peasants to the promised land. The political streams through which he traversed and in which he was situated constantly flowed into one another—they had emerged out of one common anti-imperialist stream which itself had many tributaries that continued to swell its current, and they also flowed back into it after some meandering. The different shades of the water that flowed into the main stream and out of it kept altering its hues as well as its velocity, but not its course. Just as Joga or Wadhawa Ram or Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri cannot be split into two parts, one élite, that participated in and was born out of the national movement, and the other subaltern, that participated in the peasant movements; the movements they led cannot also be pigeon-holed into élite and subaltern or separated by a Chinese wall.

Sundry other lives wove patterns similar to those of Jagir Singh Joga, with their own variations. Dalip Singh Tapiala,[61] too, heard stories of the burning of the Lloyd Bank and of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre in Amritsar in 1919 as a young child and learnt that the British had ruined his country. He remembered that his village had formed a parallel government and set

[61] The following account is based on his interview.

up *panchayats* during the Non-Cooperation Movement and also burnt their turbans made of fine cloth. His father's brother was dismissed from the army for wearing a black turban in solidarity with the Akalis—when he returned home, the entire village dyed their turbans black. His uncle joined the Akali *jathas* and he would watch them marching through his village and listen avidly to accounts of what he called their real non-violent struggle in which they bore repression stoically. As a student in Lahore, he attended political meetings organized by all political trends as also the Lahore Congress session in 1929. The life and sacrifices of Sohan Singh Josh, the Akali leader who had become a Communist and was arrested and tried in the famous Meerut conspiracy case, then became Dalip Singh's inspiration and he gravitated towards left-wing politics and also to the peasant movement.

While organizing *kisan sabhas* and participating in and helping organize the Amritsar Kisan Morcha and the Lahore Kisan Morcha, Dalip Singh Tapiala also recruited Congress members, "took the Congress to the villages" in Ajnala Tehsil of Amritsar District, became president of the Tehsil Congress, member of the District Congress Working Committee and a delegate to the PCC. He even participated fully in the factional struggle within the Congress in which the CPI group led by Sohan Singh Josh, of which he was a part, supported the group led by Dr Gopi Chand, who was supposed to be a right-wing Congressman, against Dr Satyapal, who supposedly led the more left-wing Congress group and was supported by the Kirtis. In the Congress elections held in 1938, Sohan Singh Josh, the leader of the CPI group to which Dalip Singh belonged, was elected the general secretary of the PCC.

As a good Congressman, Dalip Singh Tapiala also explained the drain of wealth and other nationalist ideas to the peasants, and asked them to strengthen the Congress, "the biggest political party", in order to throw out the British. He asked peasants to vote for the Congress in the district board elections just as he asked them to join the kisan *morchas*. Till the People's War line came in 1941, he continued working within the Congress. On his own testimony, he never experienced any difficulty in working among the peasantry with his left ideology while he was in the Congress. The Congress, he said, never tried to stop their work or passed any resolution against them or threatened them with expulsion. The only plea it made, he said, was that the anti-imperialist platform should not be divided—all demands should be made from a common platform.

Similarly, Joginder Singh Chhina[62] recalled the Jallianwala incident, the participation in the Akali Movement by his maternal grandparents and uncle who brought him up, his own participation in communal unity programmes in the wake of the communal riots in the mid-1920s, the

[62] The following account is based on his interview.

influence of the *Kirti* paper, the Lahore Congress to attend which his father sent him money from Burma where he was employed, the impact of his brother, Kartar Singh Gill's involvement in Ghadar/Kirti politics in the United States of America (USA) in the late 1920s, the influence of Bhagat Singh, of Marxist ideas. Personal reasons prevented him from joining active politics earlier, but on his brother's return via the Moscow Ghadar/Kirti route in 1936, he too jumped into the fray and joined "the Congress—the joint front for fighting the British". In 1938, he was involved in the famous Fatehwal incident in Amritsar District (see Chapter 5) and spent many years in jail.

For Bhagat Singh Bilga,[63] who came from a family of *zaildars*, known for their loyalism, the first exposure to anti-British feeling came via his classmate who was the son of the Ghadri Baba Rur Singh of Chuharchak, the village in which Bhagat Singh went to school when he went to stay with his grandparents. Nationalist feelings were further aroused on ship *en route* to Argentina in search of work when he found that Chinese co-passengers would not speak to him because Indians were used by the British in China as troops against the Chinese. They only spoke to him when he said that Indians also wanted freedom and it hit him then that Indians were hated abroad because of their bondage. Argentina led to contact with the Ghadarites, and then to Moscow and then to Punjab and its peasants. Back in his village Bilga, a known nationalist stronghold, he found it easy to work under the banner of the Congress, which, according to him, had many pro-*kisan* elements, such as Ujagar Singh Bilga of his own village, in whose *haveli* he used to conduct his study circles. Bhagat Singh Bilga then went on to become a major leader of the Punjab kisans, and of the Communist movement as a whole in the province.

Harkishen Singh Surjeet's[64] father was a nationalist, who participated in the Akali Movement, and then left politics due to straitened circumstances. Surjeet himself jumped into politics in the Civil Disobedience Movement when he narrowly escaped being hit by the policeman's bullet while hoisting the national flag atop an official building in 1932 when he was just fourteen. After that, in jail, he got influenced by the left and on coming out joined the CPI group led by Josh. There was no looking back after that and he spent all his energies organizing the peasants in Jullundur and other districts into Kisan Sabhas and Congress Committees. In his interview, he said categorically that he had never any trouble from the Congress in this entire phase in the late 1930s. On the contrary, he asserted, "we were the Congress, we took the Congress to the villages".

The examples can be multiplied *ad infinitum*. So many others, big and small, followed broadly similar routes. In the case of Master Hari Singh,

[63] The following account is based on his interview.
[64] The following account is based on his interview.

who joined the Communist Party only in 1940 in Deoli camp jail and before that was a Praja Mandalist, a Nehruite Congressmen, a *kisan* leader and was, on his own admission, deeply influenced by the Akali Movement, the linkages are obvious. As they are in the case of Narain Singh Shahbazpuri of Amritsar District, who acknowledges the influences of the Akali and Civil Disobedience movements before he became a Communist—only to return to the Congress fold after the People's War line. Ujagar Singh Bilga started with the Ghadar Movement, and then traversed the Rowlatt Satyagraha, Non-Cooperation, Akali, Civil Disobedience and *kisan* movements. Ram Singh Majitha's father was an Akali and he himself was influenced also by Bhagat Singh's NJBS, then by Sohan Singh Josh, the Kirtis and then moved into the Kisan Sabha.[65]

Even those who apparently came straight to the left-led peasant movement often acknowledged other influences. Wadhawa Ram, the leader of the tenants in the canal colonies, for example, acknowledges nationalist influence on him while studying for the *patwari's* course in Amritsar. Ruldu Khan, who helped organize the tenants in Ferozepore District, says he was influenced by the Akali struggle and the Sikh religious tradition of fighting against oppression. G.S. Randhawa, who came directly to the peasant movement, was from Jullundur District which was an old nationalist stronghold.[66] That this trajectory was not confined to those who emerged as important leaders is shown by the example of Jwala Singh Barapind,[67] whose family owned only two acres of land in a village in Jullundur District, who was illiterate and who remained a grassroots-level political worker throughout his life. Born in 1901, he recalled that he could date the first glimmerings of his political consciousness to an incident in 1914, when the police came to arrest a relative who was a defector from the army. He was angry, he said, with the British because they had the nerve to arrest Indians in their own country. The massacre at Jallianwala Bagh aroused strong feelings of resentment, and in the Non-Cooperation Movement that followed he joined in to burn foreign cloth (as he put it in Punjabi, "*Asan malmalan phookian*") in Jullundur City. Them came the Akali *jathas*, and Jwala Singh was busy looking after them when they went through his area, feeding them and going with them till the outer limits of his domain. The Babbar Akalis, too, received his support—he surreptitiously supplied them with food in their hiding place on the pretext of grazing his cattle. Civil Disobedience came, and despite living a thousand miles or more away from the coast, Jwala Singh too made salt. The authorities booked him for instigating non-payment of land revenue and kept him in jail for a year.

[65] Interviews.

[66] Interviews.

[67] The following account is based on his interview.

The revival of political activity via the *Kisan Sabhas* in the mid-1930s, with the left trend now in the lead, saw him as an active mobilizer for the big conferences held in the area, especially for one held in his village, the memory of which was still vivid in his mind in the winter of 1983 when he sat on his *manji* in the sun in his field talking about it. He talked at length about how he went from house to house in the surrounding villages collecting grain for the *langar*, and making sure the people would come; how they organized the *langar* with the whole village participating in the cooking and the serving, how the president-elect came on the best horse of the area at the head of a procession from the station. During the mid and late 1930s, he was one among many Communists in his district who built the Kisan Sabha and the Congress organization in the villages and participated in Congress and Kisan Committee elections.

Can Jwala Singh's life and his work be declared as belonging exclusively to the history of either nationalism, or socialism, or as part of the "autonomous" activity of the subalterns? If a history of nationalism or of socialism, or of nationalism and socialism, includes him as part of its subject, does this amount, as alleged by Guha, to an "act of appropriation" by the history of nationalism of the history of socialism or *vice versa*, or by one or the other or both of the history of the peasants, or subalterns.[68] And are there really "many histories", as the currently popular phrase goes? There are indeed many *interpretations* of history, many versions of history, some better, others worse, some less to our taste and some more, but can these *interpretations*, these historiographies be elevated to the status of history itself? Must the arrogance of the post-modernist present make it deny the very existence of the past that lies beyond the limits of its own comprehension? And when these allegedly separate "histories" are so intertwined within individual lives, can one unwind them without breaking the threads, can one separate the warp from the weft, without tearing asunder the delicate fabric?

A few examples of peasant movements that were not launched as part of any major wave of national struggle might help to illustrate the argument further. The Bardoli no-tax movement of 1928, led by the nationalist leader, Sardar Patel, was undoubtedly seen by its peasant participants, by large number of peasants in other parts of the country, including Punjab, by other sections of the Indian people—the intelligentsia, the middle classes, the bourgeoisie, the workers—as well as by different political groups, including the Workers' and Peasants' parties under the direction of the Communists, as simultaneously an expression of specific peasant grievances and a powerful gesture of defiance of imperial authority.[69] The government, too,

[68] Ranajit Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", in Guha, *Subaltern Studies II*, p. 33.

[69] N.G. Ranga says that the "political slogan" of Kisan Raj given by him at the Bezwada Andhra Ryots' Conference in 1929 "did not catch the imagination of the peasants of many provinces since they had as yet not become sufficiently politically conscious. Just that necessary

understood it in a similar fashion; its unwillingness to concede the demands and its willingness to use a great degree of suppression reflected its understanding of the profound impact that events in Bardoli had succeeded in making on large sections of Indian society, especially the peasantry. Can Bardoli then be seen either exclusively as a peasant movement or simply as a part of the national movement? Would it not have to be characterized as a peasant struggle that was an integral part of the national movement? Gandhiji has, I believe, made the best characterization of the relationship of Bardoli and other peasant struggles with the struggle for freedom:[70]

> Whatever the Bardoli struggle may be, it clearly is not a struggle for the direct attainment of *swaraj*. That every such awakening, every such effort as that of Bardoli will bring *swaraj* nearer and may bring it nearer even than any direct effort is undoubtedly true.

Can even the legendary Telengana peasant struggle, launched by the Communist Party of India under the banner of the Andhra Mahasabha, which started as a protest against irregularities in the collection of the forced grain levy imposed by the Nizam, and which put up a heroic resistance against the fascist communal bands of the Nizam's storm troopers, the *razakars*, and whose main demand, at least till 1948, was integration of Hyderabad State with the Indian Union, and whose leadership, cadre and mass following responded fully to every call for action given by the Hyderabad State Congress between August 1947 and September 1948 and in fact demanded of the State Congress that they constitute a joint leadership for the conduct of the anti-Nizam struggle, be seen simply as an autonomous peasant movement or even only as a part of the Communist movement in India?[71] Was it not equally and as much an integral part of the anti-imperialist struggle of the Indian people, that is, of the national movement for the overthrow of imperialism? In case this sounds far-fetched today, we may recall that the Indian army when it entered Hyderabad State in September 1948 was welcomed enthusiastically by the peasants as an army of liberation that would deliver them from the oppression of the razakars and the Nizam,[72]

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spade work was again done in a revolutionary manner, by the famous Bardoli No-Tax Campaign of 1928 conducted so successfully by Sardar Vallabhbhai Patel. That triumph of peasants' Satyagraha opened the eyes of large sections of peasants, all over India to their own political potentialities and encouraged them to shake themselves free from the age-long stupor and political depression...." *Revolutionary Peasants*, New Delhi, 1949, pp. 61–62.

[70] M.K. Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol. 38, p. 73. For a discussion of the nationwide impact of the Bardoli struggle, see Mridula Mukherjee, "Peasant Movements and Nationalism in the 1920s", in Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence,* Chapter 18.

[71] See P. Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle and its Lessons*, Calcutta, 1972; and Barry Pavier, *Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, New Delhi, 1981.

[72] Pavier, *Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, pp. 143–44.

and that the peasants celebrated their liberation by hoisting the tricolour, the banner of the Indian National Congress, that had now become the Indian national flag.[73] It is another matter that many of the Communist leaders of the movement misjudged the readiness of the peasants to struggle against the Nizam and the British who stood behind him, that is, their anti-imperialist and anti-feudal sentiments, as proof of their willingness to struggle for a socialist or people's democratic revolution, as well as grossly over-estimated the strength of the Communist movement in the rest of the country, and launched themselves and the peasants of Telengana into a suicidal confrontation with the newly founded independent Indian State. To our mind, the course of the Telengana struggle after 1948, especially the narrowing of its mass base and support,[74] tends to suggest that while the peasants of Telengana, from 1946 onwards, accepted and fought under the leadership of the Communists, they did so because they saw the Communists (who continued to work under the banner of the Andhra Mahasabha and not that of the CPI) as the most militant, and perhaps in some areas the only, fighters against the Nizam and his British guarantors.[75] It would seem then that in the peasants consciousness at least, if not in that of some of their leaders, their movement was very much a part of the national struggle for liberation from imperialism and its princely stooges.

This was of course also true of numerous other examples of peasant resistance under the leadership of left-wing groups and organizations as well as of those launched under non-left leadership—the Kerala peasant movement of the 1930s led by the Congress Socialist leaders who later

[73] Communist workers had themselves popularized the national flag in the villages: "...an imaginative approach to the national question in Nalgonda produced positive results. The national movement made it possible to organise in the villages and the existence of the State Congress Satyagraha produced a mass mobilisation in the villages.... CPI/Andhra Mahasabha cadres went on a *jaitryatra* or tour of the villages, hoisting the Indian flag and destroying village records.... [Thus] the national and agrarian campaigns were united in one. As the groups moved on, youths from the villages would join them". Pavier, *Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, p. 112.

[74] The first important reason given by Sundarayya for the withdrawal of the Telengana Movement in 1951 is "that in the very bastions of the Telengana Movement, Nalgonda, Khammam, Warrangal districts, in all the plains areas, the mass participation had become less and less". Sundarayya, *Telengana Peoples' Struggle*, p. 423.

[75] "In fact there was no artificial barrier to be drawn between the national movement in Hyderabad and the agrarian movement. At this time 'accession to India' was understood to mean the overthrow of the Nizam and his regime in all its aspects.... The demands for accession (to India) and the overthrow of the *deshmukhs* were inextricably united because the Nizam's regime rested to a great extent on those very *deshmukhs*.... In fact people who were actually involved in the campaigns argue that the anti-Nizam struggle was a shield to the agrarian struggle and that the CPI was greatly assisted by the fact that people saw them as leading the national movement." Pavier, *Telengana Movement, 1944–51*, pp. 116–17. Also see, Hamza Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution", in A.R. Desai, ed., *Peasant Struggles in India*, p. 708.

declared themselves as the state unit of the CPI,[76] the Bihar Kisan Sabha movement led by Swami Sahajanand till 1941, the Andhra peasant movement in the 1920s and the 1930s under the leadership of N.G. Ranga, the Congress Socialists and Communists, the Punjab peasant movement of the late 1920s, 1930s and 1940s which came increasingly under left influence, and the Bengal peasant movements in the 1930s and 1940s.[77]

The peasant movements in the princely states, again launched both under left and non-left leadership, were also increasingly seen, by participants as well as others, as part of the common anti-imperialist struggle. Anti-imperialism was an important component of the ideology of the peasant movements that emerged in the princely states of Rajasthan, Gujarat, Kerala, Gwalior, Orissa, etc.

In the case of the peasant movements in the UP in 1918–22 and 1930–32, the Red Shirts' Movement in the North-West Frontier Province from 1930–32, as well as of the peasant militancy that formed the heart of the Quit India Movement, especially in Maharashtra, UP, Bihar and Bengal, the case for their being inseparable and integral parts of the national movement is even stronger, despite recent laboured and unconvincing attempts to argue that they became possible only because "the basic Gandhian strategy of courting arrest meant that established leaders and cadres were quickly removed from the scene, and this often provided an opportunity for sporadic but militant movements from below, a kind of less inhibited second wave...."[78] and that, therefore, these movements should not be seen as part of the "élite" stream but of the "subaltern" stream.[79]

The vital link between the anti-imperialist movement and the peasant movement was also demonstrated by the course of the peasant movement during the Second World War, after the All-India Kisan Sabha, following

[76] For a full account of the peasant movement in Malabar and its relationship with the national movement, see K. Gopalankutty, "The integration of the Anti-Landlord Movement with the Movement Against Imperialism—the Case of Malabar, 1935–39", in Bipan Chandra, ed., *The Indian Left: Critical Appraisals*, New Delhi, 1983, pp. 201–14.

[77] Of the Damodar Canal Tax movement in Bengal in the late 1930s, Buddhadev Bhattacharya writes: "The primary motive behind the canal tax agitation was, of course, political. It was aimed at stimulating resistance against the colonial rule. Secondarily, the movement was based on the grievances of the local peasantry burdened with a heavy rate of improvement levy." Buddhadev Bhattacharya et al., "Damodar Canal Tax Movement", in A. R. Desai, *Peasant Struggles in India* , p. 379.

[78] Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 291.

[79] This formulation has been made most strongly by Stephen Henningham for the Quit India Movement. For alternative viewpoints on the Quit India Movement very different from Henningham's, see Chandan S. Mitra, Political Mobilisation and the Nationalist Movement in Eastern Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, 1937–42, unpublished D.Phil. thesis, Oxford University, 1983; Radhika Singha, *Aspects of the Quit India Movement in Eastern U.P.* unpublished M.Phil. dissertation, JNU, New Delhi, 1986 and Amit Mishra, *Quit India Movement in the Ballia district of U.P.*, unpublished M. Phil dissertation, JNU, New Delhi, 2000. Also see pp. 434–35, this volume.

the Communist line of People's War, diverged from the path of the national movement. The Kisan Sabha stood away from the Quit India Movement, and as a consequence lost much of its mass base (membership figures notwithstanding) and even some of its cadre. Many local level Communist and Kisan Sabha cadre even participated in the Quit India Movement in defiance of the orders from above. Many of those who did not actually defy the orders and join the Quit India Movement, found it difficult to go to the peasantry without watering down the pro-British, pro-war part and greatly strengthening the pro-nationalist, pro-Congress, that is, the anti-imperialist part of their programme and ideology. In fact, at times the pro-nationalist emphasis became so strong that it almost reduced the pro-British and pro-war aspect to a mere ritual, and time and again the government seriously wondered whether the freedom of action that they had allowed the Communists and Communist Kisan Sabha workers in the hope that their propaganda would help in countering the national movement and in promoting the war effort, was really worth continuing in view of the fact that many of them spent more time in their speeches on demanding the release of Congress leaders and criticizing the government than on mobilizing the peasantry for the war effort (for Punjab, see Chapter 6). In this period, the All-India Kisan Sabha also suffered another big blow: three of its most prominent leaders, N.G. Ranga, Indulal Yagnik and Swami Sahajanand left the Kisan Sabha and the organization.

Nature of the Relationship

It does appear, then, that a major feature of peasant protest in the twentieth century colonial India was that it was increasingly an integral and inseparable part of the anti-imperialist movement, especially in terms of its ideology, but also by way of its impact and often even in terms of leadership and organization. The question that can then be asked is: did the peasantry's involvement with the Indian national movement, a movement over which the perspective of a democratic path to independent national development within a largely bourgeois framework continued to exercise considerable hegemony—but within which the socialist perspective also exercised considerable influence—further or retard the peasantry's struggle for a better life? Did the involvement lead to a heightening of their political and class consciousness, did it enhance their ability to struggle against exploitation or did it obstruct the process of political awakening and social struggle?

The question is not—as it is sometimes posed—whether the national movement led the peasantry towards a socialist revolution. It could not,

since that was never its objective. The question is also not—as is often posed—why Gandhiji did not impart socialist ideas to the peasantry. He would not, since he did not accept the then current non-democratic version of socialism based on the necessity of violent class struggle. He could only impart the ideas he believed in—of equality, of democracy, of fearlessness, of resistance to all oppression—and these he imparted more successfully than any other.

Of course, one can also wonder, at least with the aid of the hindsight available today, whether a greater success of the "socialist" revolutionary project—the desirability of which is the assumption on which these questions get asked—would have been such a good idea after all for the peasants (or for others). Considering that when they have indeed been led into successful socialist revolutions, they have often faced decimation via forced collectivisation, as in the Soviet Union, or via famines and supposed cultural revolutions, as in China, or via the whims of dictators, as by Pol Pot in Cambodia, or via disastrous political and economic strategies, as in Mozambique. Indian peasants, by being led into a national democratic revolution, and not into a "socialist" one, have faced poverty and inequality, but have at least retained the capacity to protest and prevent total marginalization and decimation, and at least some sections have even improved the conditions of their existence.

But polemics apart, it is my contention that the answer to the question posed earlier has to be in the affirmative, and this for many reasons. The national movement, as demonstrated here, familiarized the peasants with modern forms of politics and organization, with the modern ideology of anti-imperialism, with viable strategies and techniques of resistance; it generated leaders and cadre who spent their lives among the peasants.

In addition, by enhancing the peasants' awareness of their exploitation by imperialism, the national movement increased their capacity to perceive other types of exploitation as well, such as that carried on by landlords and moneylenders. And by increasing their capacity to struggle against a particular form of oppression, that is, imperialist oppression, it simultaneously increased their capacity to fight other types of oppression. This is because the enhancement of political awareness of a specific situation or the capacity to understand a specific structure of exploitation simultaneously creates the capacity and the potential for understanding other structures of exploitation, just as the capability and experience of struggling against a particular type of oppression generates and enhances the capacity to fight other types of oppression.

Further, the peasantry's association with the national movement helped its struggle against indigenous exploiters in a more direct way as well. Since imperialism was the main guarantor and at times even creator of the indigenous exploiting classes of princes, landlords and moneylenders, any

advance of the struggle against imperialism had an immediate and automatic effect on the fortunes of these classes as well. Any weakening of imperialism, any blow struck at the heart of the colonial structure of exploitation, led simultaneously to the weakening of those who derived the surety of their existence from that very structure. The relative ease with which the process of the integration of the princely states into the Indian Union and the abolition of zamindari was accomplished after Independence, that is, without generating any major social upheaval, is proof both of the extent to which these elements were dependent on the colonial state and the colonial structure as well as of the extent to which they had been weakened or neutralized.

The struggle against imperialism helped in another way as well. Often under the pressure of the anti-imperialist movement and of the peasant struggles that constituted an important part of it, the colonial state itself was forced to sacrifice the interests of its traditional social base—it accepted the need for protective tenancy legislation, for regulation of interest rates and usurious practices, etc. How far these measures actually helped the majority of peasants is indeed debatable, but the fact remains that they did hit at the interests of those that constituted the traditional social base of the colonial state. Thus, it could be said that the struggle against the primary contradiction helped in no small way to tackle the secondary contradictions of Indian society.

And further, the integration of the peasant movements with the national movement, the enmeshing of the peasant struggles with the struggle for national liberation, meant that peasant struggles were no longer only sectional economic struggles against particular instances of exploitation and oppression, but were increasingly becoming political struggles, in the highest sense of the term, for a transformation of the society from a colonial, backward one to an independent, developing one.

Participation in the national struggle also helped to remove the fear of authority, of the mighty British government, under which peasants lived. The mass defiance of laws, the courting of arrest and non-payment of taxes, all helped to give the peasants a new self-confidence in their ability to successfully defy the government and resist oppression. This psychological change was crucial, for without it there could be no peasant organization and peasant struggle.

The association of the peasants and of peasant movements with the national movement also acted as a shield against repression. Once nationalist leaders and cadre were associated with any particular peasant struggle, the government was wary of using strong methods against it for fear of the nationalists making a hue and cry in the cities, and in the press, and turning public opinion against the government.

The national movement also secured economic concessions for and provided economic relief to the peasants. In Bardoli, for example, the fact that prominent nationalist leaders like Patel assumed the leadership of the movement, and succeeded in making it an all-India issue was certainly important in securing tax reduction for the peasants.[80] In Punjab, nationalists of all hues, Central Sikh League, Akalis, Naujawan Bharat Sabha, Kirtis, Gandhians and others together built up the movement which secured major remissions in taxes in the early 1930s (see Chapter 3). In the UP, in 1930–31, the no-rent no-revenue campaign led by the Congress secured important remissions in revenue and rent.[81] The Congress ministries that assumed office in 1937 were responsible for rent and revenue reductions, tenancy legislation, debt relief legislation and for abolishing feudal levies like *salami*.[82]

The struggle for greater civil liberties, which was an important and continuous part of the national movement, also considerably enhanced the freedom of the peasantry to organize and express itself. Again, the Congress ministries, by increasing the civil liberties of the people, provided the Kisan Sabhas with greater freedom to carry on their work and therefore the years 1937–39 were years of a great spurt in the peasant movement all over India.[83] A sharp contrast is provided in Punjab by the Unionist ministry which came

[80] See Shirin Mehta, *The Peasantry and Nationalism: A Study of the Bardoli Satyagraha*, New Delhi, 1984; and Mridula Mukherjee, "Peasant Movements and Nationalism in the 1920s", in Chandra, et. al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Chapter 16.

[81] To quote Pandey: "By detailed investigation of agrarian conditions, and by prolonged negotiations with the government on the subject of remissions and the treatment of defaulting peasants, as well as by rural meetings and organisation and the partial encouragement of the policy of withholding rents and revenue even during 'truce', the Congress made a major contribution to the obtaining of relief". "Without the presence of the Congress the task (of containing peasant discontent) might have been accomplished through smaller remissions and a freer use of force". Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, p. 100.

[82] Even the record of the Bihar ministry, which was supposed to be the most "right-wing" of all, was not so bad. B.B. Chaudhuri lists the following measures taken by the Bihar Congress ministry during 1937–39 which in his view "undoubtedly helped the peasantry": "1) Rent was reduced by 25 per cent, on an average. The Ministry persuaded the zamindars to agree not only to a reduction of the cash rent, but also of the share of the crop. 2) Peasant holdings were made transferable without the prior consent of zamindars, and the salami that was payable to them at the time of such transfers was greatly reduced. 3) Sales by zamindars of the entire holdings of peasants on grounds of non-payment of due rent were made illegal. Zamindars were to sell only a part of the holdings, which was enough for the realisation of the arrears of rent". B.B. Chaudhuri, "Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar", p. 364. Also see Bipan Chandra, "Twenty-Eight Months of Congress Rule", in Chandra, et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Chapter 26.

[83] This aspect emerged very clearly in interviews with a large number of peasant leaders all over the country carried out by me and my colleagues as part of a project on the history of the Indian national movement, headed by Professor Bipan Chandra, of which I am a Co-Director. Also see *ibid*.

to power in 1937 and kept up a relentless pressure on peasant activists through arrests, externments from the province, internments in the village, and bans on newspapers and journals (see Chapter 4, Section V).

The idea of national unity, of Indians being one people, which permeated into the consciousness of the peasantry as a result of the efforts of the national movement, created the basis for the all-India unity of the peasants as well. Without the idea of an Indian nation, there could be no all-India peasant movement or All-India Kisan Sabha. For peasants to understand that they had interests that were common with peasants in other parts of the country, they had to first grasp the idea that there was an Indian nation, and in this the national movement played a crucial role. It was only then that peasant struggles could, however gradually, overcome their localized character and assume an all-India character and significance. That this was well-understood by the leaders of the peasants is beyond doubt:[84]

> No longer are our peasants' satyagraha campaigns isolated struggles unobserved by the peasants of other parts, as Lenin found Russians to be. Wherever there was a struggle, the peasants of the whole of India came to be interested in it, collected funds, observed sympathetic all-India Days and helped the sufferers in every possible manner.... True, the All-India Peasants Congress had come to knit all the peasants together under the aegis of a National Peasant unity. But it was Mahatma Gandhi and the National Congress which laid the foundations for the growth of the new consciousness and familiarised the peasants with the potent idea of their national unity.

Unlike the subalterns, the traditional Marxist writers do recognize many, though not all, of the features of the relationship that we have discussed here. They clearly accept that the national movement after 1918 and especially Gandhi played a crucial role in mobilizing and organizing the peasantry in anti-imperialist mass struggles that expressed the peasantry's primary contradiction with imperialism. They also acknowledge that this process made available to the peasantry a modern nationalist ideology that was an advance over the peasantry's own existing level of understanding or consciousness and the traditional ideologies available to them.[85] They are able to perceive this because they do not share the "subalternists'" romantic image of an inherently rebellious and even revolutionary peasantry.

[84] N.G. Ranga, *Revolutionary Peasants*, p. 58.

[85] A.R. Desai, for example, accepts that "even the limited calls given by Gandhi and the Indian National Congress unleashed gigantic political ferment among the peasantry, deepened the anti-imperialist consciousness in various strata of rural India and linked the rural masses with the larger nationalist anti-British movement.... By pointing out that the grievances of the masses could be removed only if British political control was eliminated, the Indian National Congress succeeded in linking up the immediate demands to political demands and enabled various exploited strata to lift their consciousness from immediate local

However, they simultaneously believe that the national movement and especially Gandhi had a negative impact on the peasantry and its struggles because of (*a*) the tendency to withdraw or curb movements just when peasant militancy was about to break the bounds set by the bourgeois or upper-class character of the movement,[86] (*b*) its insistence on non-violence in order to protect the interests of the propertied sections, (*c*) the lack of incorporation of the "class" demands of the peasantry, that is, the anti-landlord and anti-moneylender demands, into the programme of the national movement (which was confined to anti-colonial demands such as reduction in land revenue, water rates, salt tax and taxation in general, or to demands for irrigation, industrialization and the like), and lack of encouragement to struggles based on these demands and (*d*) its unwillingness to promote and encourage the class organizations of the peasantry. The explanation for these "negative" features is found in the traditional Marxist assumption that the national movement was led by a weak and compromising bourgeoisie which tended to vacillate in its struggle against imperialism and that this vacillation often led to compromise and negotiated settlements with imperialism in which the interests of the masses were betrayed; in the assumption that bourgeois or propertied class (and not national) interests were the first concern of the nationalist leadership and this led to their ignoring or sacrificing the peasants' class demands and class struggles and to a discouragement of their class organization; as well as in the assumption that "non-violence" and needs of common struggle were merely ready tools which helped to obfuscate the reality and cloak the real "class" reasons for this behaviour.[87]

The traditional Marxist position, however, despite the apparent similarity of some of its conclusions with those of the "subalternists", is still quite fundamentally different from the "subaltern" one, because it flows from a different set of assumptions—its reasons and methodology for arriving at even some similar conclusions are different. The duality of their position,

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grievances to politico-structural causes, which subsequently helped them to see their problems in the context of larger issues of Socialism and Capitalism.... The Gandhian strategy included many programmes which took up the issues of securing relief to the poor peasantry, the tenants, share croppers and the exploited tribals as well as specially aggrieved strata like the untouchables and the artisans of lower classes.... The role of Gandhi and the nationalist movement in involving the peasantry in political struggles and thereby politicizing them and awakening them cannot be denied." A.R. Desai, Introduction to Part IV, in A.R. Desai, *Peasant Struggles in India*, pp. 280–81.

[86] The withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in February 1922 after the violence at Chauri Chaura, the signing of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact and the negotiated transfer of power in 1947 are cited as proof of this tendency of the Congress by almost all Marxist writers.

[87] See, for example, A.R. Desai, *Peasant Struggles in India*, especially p. 756; and R.P. Dutt, *India Today*, Bombay, 1949 edition, especially p. 353.

their characterization of the relationship as both positive and negative, springs from the duality or contradictions in their own understanding of the nature of contradictions in Indian society and the character of the national movement. While they believe that the central contradiction in the colonial epoch is to be located in the conflict of interests between colonialism and the Indian people, they do not accept the logic and full implications of this theoretical position when they get down to concrete analysis of specific historical situations and conjunctures. Similarly, while on the whole they accept the anti-imperialist credentials of the national movement and its leadership, they also believe that this anti-imperialism, based as it was on the bourgeoisie's vacillating position vis-à-vis imperialism and on the fear of mass militancy, was not sturdy and uncompromising but prone to surrender and betrayal. The "subalternists", while rejecting the positive aspects of the Marxists' evaluation of the national movement, have no hesitation in accepting the negative ones, despite their belief that Marxist historiography is also "élite".[88]

I shall now attempt to demonstrate, by means of constructing an alternative framework for understanding the relationship between the national movement and the peasantry, how the contradictory logic of the Marxists' theoretical positions, or the refusal to accept the logic of one part of their theoretical understanding, vitiates their understanding of the relationship between the national movement and the peasantry. And since many of the conclusions arrived at by the traditional Marxists, though on the basis of a different conceptual framework, are similar to those of the "subalternists", the following discussion will serve simultaneously as a critique of the "subaltern" approach.

If the colonial structure or colonialism is seen as the primary obstacle or central contradiction facing the peasantry as well as the rest of Indian society in their quest for economic, social, political and cultural development, and if the national movement, with the Indian National Congress as its specific organizational form, is seen as the expression of the growing recognition of this reality by the entire Indian people as well as the forum through which they increasingly chose to demonstrate their resolve to remove this obstruction, and also if the peasantry's growing participation in this common anti-imperialist movement is seen as historically necessary and desirable, and not *ipso facto* as a negative development, as by the "subalternists", then

[88] For example, Sumit Sarkar refers to the "dependent bourgeoisie of colonial India" which was inhibited by "its relations of dependence and collaboration with foreign rule and British capital, close connections with pre-capitalist forms of exploitation of the small producer through rent, usury and trade..., fear of an already fairly militant working class as well as the lack of cultural hegemony in so far as there was little permeation of modern bourgeois values throughout society." Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 72.

there are certain logical implications that flow from this understanding which must be grasped if the character of the peasantry's relationship with the national movement is to be analysed.

First, the national movement was a multi-class movement—a movement not only of the peasantry but also of other social classes and strata of Indian society, that is, the bourgeoisie, the petty-bourgeoisie, the intelligentsia, workers, artisans, youth, women and even ruined and small landlords, who all brought their demands, their urges, their particular political styles into the movement.

Second, the national movement contained within it people who shared the ideology of anti-imperialist nationalism but had widely divergent perspectives of post-independence social development and these perspectives were reflected in the many political trends that coexisted in the movement and contended for hegemony. These political trends also had differences over the strategic path to be followed by the movement and also over the tactics, the forms of struggle, their timing and the like.

This meant that the peasantry and its leaders, when they became an increasing part of the common national struggle, had to adjust their demands and the pattern, the forms and timing of their struggles keeping in view, or in the context of, the demands and the pattern, the forms and timing of the struggle of other social classes and strata in the national movement, just as the other classes and strata had to accommodate the urges, the ethos and the interests of the peasantry. Similarly, political trends representing the peasants would have to accommodate and adjust their perspectives with the other existing political trends.

This also implied, for example, that if at a given historical moment or in a specific conjuncture, some sections or groups of the people or some political trends were prepared for a phase of active struggle or convinced of the desirability of such a phase, but other social classes or political groups were either not ready or were unconvinced, then the logic of the common struggle demanded that they accommodate each other's perspectives and evolve a consensus about whether or not to launch a particular struggle. The consensus would be a reflection of the strength of different sections, their past and present level of participation in the movement and their ideological and organizational preparedness for struggle.

But since in practice it is impossible for different social classes and sections to physically participate in the evolution of such a consensus at any specific point of time, this role is most often performed, on their behalf, by the leadership of the movement. The task of the leadership is precisely to weigh the conflicting understanding or claims of different sections and political trends and then arrive at a judgement as to the best course of action. That the decision of the leadership actually reflects a societal consensus, and is not a mere imposition, is tested by whether the decision is

accepted by different sections of the people or whether by following a path of political action divergent from that indicated by the leadership they reject the decision. Historically speaking, for the Indian national movement in its mass phase, which began after 1918, this task was performed primarily by Gandhi and the continued acceptance, over roughly 30 long years, of his leadership by different sections of the Indian people shows that they saw his decisions as reflective of a genuine consensus and not as mere impositions.

However, a consensus on the need for struggle would not necessarily imply the equal active participation of all sections. It may in fact apportion a more active role to some and a more passive role to others. Different sections may participate more actively and more passively in different phases of the struggle, depending on the nature of the struggle, its programme and the staying power and capacity of the participants. The existence of the consensus would be reflected in the fact that the temporary passivity of some, or a different form of their participation, does not become the basis for the passive elements being branded as "less revolutionary" or "less nationalist" or as "betrayers" and "traitors" or their class demands or requirements being omitted from the consensus programme by the temporarily more active ones. Instead, their "passivity" or incapacity to participate is seen as a product of specific constraints. And in any case, the attempt would be to help the weaker elements to remove the causes of their passivity, to take them along as far as they are willing to go, and thus strengthen the common struggle, and not to "expose" them as weak or vacillating in order to prove the superior revolutionariness or commitment of the stronger elements. Such "exposure" would only weaken the movement by alienating these sections from it and even pushing them into the arms of the enemy. These elements might then turn from "weak supporters" into "weak" or even "strong opponents".

Divergences over readiness to launch on a path of struggle may well exist not only between different social classes but also between different sections of the same social class or stratum. For example, peasants in one region or locality may be more prepared for a path of struggle or sacrifice than similar peasants in other areas. This would depend on the degree of their politicization, their capacity to bear privation, their economic staying power, the support of other social groups in the area, etc. But the decision to launch or continue an all-India movement involving struggle and sacrifice by peasants would be based on an assessment of the all-India situation and not on that obtaining in one small part of the country.

The logic of a common struggle implies that a check on the progress of the more advanced sections may at times be necessary in the interest of the struggle as a whole. The acceptance of this check by the advanced sections, by those whose capacity for struggle is still intact, is a proof that they see

the check as actuated by the interests of the common struggle and not as an unnecessary and unwarranted surrender to the interests of some other section.[89]

This does not mean that the actual decisions regarding the pace of the movement and the extent of the participation of different sections of the people are not open to debate or discussion. What is at issue is whether such questions can be decided on the basis of *a priori* assumptions about the "essences" of different classes and strata, on the basis that certain classes were "bound to betray" or act in a particular fashion, or that certain decisions were necessarily the product of a particular class's or group's influence over the movement. All that we wish to indicate is that accommodation and adjustment, retreats and compromises were an inevitable part of a common national struggle involving such diverse social groups, and that the reasons for any particular decision affecting the course of the movement

[89] Pandey is dismissive of any such possibility: "It is now suggested, in what might be called the last stand of traditional nationalist historiography, that these sectional struggles, of peasants and workers and other labouring and exploited classes, were out of step with the primary need of the 'nation' at that stage in its history—the need to advance the anti-imperialist movement." "Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism", in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies, I*, New Delhi, 1982, pp. 151–52. The examples of this nationalist historiography, we are told by Pandey (*Ibid.*, pp. 152, n. 21), are to be found in M.H. Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India*, Delhi, 1978, pp. 217 and 219 and in Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, New Delhi, 1979, p. 347. However, it seems to us that Pandey is here guilty of a gross distortion of both Bipan Chandra's as well as Siddiqi's position on the issue. The passage that Pandey is possibly alluding to is on pp. 354–55 of Bipan Chandra's book: "It may be suggested that the basic critique here should not be that the national leadership did not promote the anti-feudal revolution with the slogan of land to the tiller. That would have thrown the landlords, big as well as small, into the 'lap' of imperialism.... The need to unite and mobilize varied interests and diverse classes and social strata into a wide national front and to neutralise those who could not be so united might indicate a policy of compromise between internally antagonistic classes, the underplaying of their mutual contradictions and the balancing of their conflicting interests." This statement, which might appear to sustain Pandey's characterization, is immediately followed by the following lines, which clarify the import of this statement as well: "But the balancing of conflicting interests precisely means both sides making sacrifices and providing accommodation.... Yet, precisely this was not done. In the name of national unity against imperialism, the peasants' class interests were more or less completely sacrificed. *National integration was promoted at the peasants' unilateral cost*." (emphasis in original). Similarly, Pandey appears to have missed Siddiqi's following statement on p. 219: "The cause of the earlier strength of the peasant movements, the politics of Indian nationalism, later proved to be their undoing because of the inadequacy of the politics of the period to incorporate the interests of the peasantry." To be fair to Pandey, however, it needs to be pointed out that Bipan Chandra's more recent views on the subject (see Chandra, *Indian National Movement* and Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*) are more suited to the label of nationalist historiography sought to be attached by Pandey to his earlier position, though Bipan Chandra would strongly urge, and with justification, that while he has moved away from the traditional Indian Marxist position, he still remains within, what E.P. Thompson so aptly defined as, the Marxist tradition.

cannot be automatically deduced, in a reductionist or, in current fashion, "essentialist" manner from the alleged needs of, or located in the desires or intentions of, one or more "dominant" classes.

In fact, there can be many different sets of reasons at any particular time which might prompt the leadership of a movement to either suspend or withdraw a movement or not to launch it altogether. Some of these are sketched out here:

(*a*) Movements may not be launched at a specific time because though some sections or trends are ready and eager for struggle others are not as yet convinced or ready.[90]

(*b*) Movements may be suspended or withdrawn because, while some sections are still in a position to carry on with struggle, others are getting exhausted or otherwise reaching a position of unwillingness to continue.[91]

(*c*) Movements may be withdrawn if the leadership feels that the enemy is willing to negotiate and make concessions and that if the struggle is continued, the right psychological moment may be lost and the opponent may then refuse to make concessions and instead opt for a path of confrontation that would be wasteful, if not ruinous.[92]

(*d*) Movements may be withdrawn if the leadership feels that the movement has reached or passed its peak and anticipates a petering out of the movement, or of certain important parts of it, or fears a suppression that could lead to decimation of the movement, and thus decides that it is better to withdraw the movement when it is perceived to be strong on its own initiative and save it from the demoralization that would occur in the event of its either petering out or being successfully suppressed.[93]

(*e*) Movements may not be actually launched if it is clear that the very threat or possibility of a struggle has convinced the enemy that it is

[90] The years 1928–29 and 1940–41, would be examples of this in the history of the Indian national movement. For such reasons, the Punjab Kisan Committee was not happy with the launching of the Lahore Kisan Morcha in 1939 by local leaders. See Chapter 5.

[91] This was possibly one reason behind the withdrawal of 1922 and the Gandhi–Irwin Pact in 1931.

[92] This was possibly an important contributory factor in the Gandhi–Irwin Pact. The Amritsar Kisan Morcha of 1938 was also withdrawn for similar reasons, as detailed in Chapter 5.

[93] The withdrawal in 1922 was likely to have been prompted by this consideration as well, as also the Gandhi–Irwin Pact. Interestingly, S.A. Dange, the veteran working-class Communist leader, said that the role of the leadership is to be able to judge when the workers, in the course of a strike, have reached or are about to reach the peak of their determination, and begin negotiations at the opportune time, to secure maximum gains. He made these comments with special reference to the Bombay textile workers strike of the early 1980s which dragged to an ignominous end, throwing lakhs of workers out of jobs (interview).

better to negotiate and compromise or surrender rather than engage in a confrontation.[94]

(*f*) Movements may be withdrawn if the leadership feels that the course of the movement is deviating too sharply from the strategic and tactical perspective considered necessary for the success of the struggle and that further advance on that path would be suicidal for the movement or gravely harm its interests.[95]

(*g*) And, of course, movements may not be launched or may be withdrawn if the right-wing leaders who represent the propertied sections of society feel that the movement is likely to harm the interests of the propertied classes.[96]

(*h*) Movements may not be launched or may be withdrawn if any or a combination of the variety of factors listed here is in existence.

Therefore, even if it is proved beyond doubt that, at certain points in the history of the anti-imperialist movement, the peasantry (or any other class) was more advanced in its determination to continue the struggle than other social classes and was restrained in its militancy, that is, its struggle was not allowed to develop to its fullest potential, this would not automatically prove that the peasantry was betrayed or its interests sacrificed at the altar of nationalism or in favour of the interests of other classes.

Similarly, if it is accepted that adjustment and accommodation of the interests of different classes and groups is inevitable and necessary—it is in the very logic of a common struggle or a common movement—then the very fact of an adjustment does not prove a "betrayal". Before one can denounce or brand a particular event as a "betrayal", one would have to examine the precise nature of the adjustment or accommodation and have to show that an unnecessary and disproportionate sacrifice was involved of the interests of one particular section, for example, the peasantry, and that similar adjustments were not made by or asked of other social classes and that the adjustment did not reflect the balance of class and political forces in the movement but was "imposed" by the leadership. Further, one would have to show that this restraint or restriction was exercised in order to further the interests of some other section, such as zamindars or the bourgeoisie, and was not exercised in the interests of the movement as a whole, that in fact it harmed the movement as a whole, and was not dictated by any of the other considerations that we have mentioned here, such as the attitude

[94] The decision to go in for negotiations for a transfer of power in 1946–47 was the result of such an assessment of the situation.

[95] It is possible that this was also a reason behind the withdrawal in 1922.

[96] This never happened in the course of the Indian national movement, it is mentioned here only as a possibility—and it is this hypothetical possibility that traditional Marxists and "subalternists" focus on as a cause to the exclusion of all the other factors.

of the enemy, its willingness to compromise and make concessions and anticipation of petering out or repression of the movement. Only if it can be shown that the major or operative consideration in the reining in or restriction of the struggle of the peasantry was not any or a combination of these factors, but the threat to the class interests of the feudal elements or the bourgeoisie, as the case may be, can a particular act of restraint be described as betrayal or sacrifice or surrender of the peasantry's interests; or the national movement be said to have had a retarding or derailing or negative effect on the peasantry.

At a general level, the argument that "Gandhian brakes" harmed the movement as a whole has been most cogently advanced by Sumit Sarkar. To quote:[97]

> It may be argued, with some justice, that any leadership, even an avowedly revolutionary one, has a necessarily restrictive aspect. It has to control spontaneity and sectional outbursts in the interests of long-term objectives and discipline…. But the argument often used to justify the Gandhians brakes and retreats that these were necessary in the interests of overall anti-imperialist unity fails to be entirely convincing once we raise the question as to the extent to which such methods were able in the end to realise the specific goals which Gandhian nationalism had set itself. That the Bardoli withdrawal caused a major setback was amply proved by the decline in nationalist tempo in the mid-1920s, marked by a disastrous slump in Congress membership (to 108,046 for 16 out of 20 provinces in March 1923; whereas UP alone had claimed 328,966 members in July 1921), internal quarrels and rapid growth of both Hindu and Muslim communalism.... At a more general level it is difficult to avoid the conclusion that Gandhian restraints inhibited the process of mobilisation for the anti-imperialist cause of large sections of the poorer peasantry, tribals and industrial workers. The Congress "umbrella" was clearly tilted in favour of more propertied sections, for after all it was not always possible to please landlords and tenants, capitalists and workers, at the same time. Gandhian Congress mobilisation, perhaps, was not "imperfect" so far as "Middle class" urban and rural propertied interests were concerned, for a broader range might well have proved socially dangerous; but it did limit the potential strength of the anti-imperialist movement—a much broader concept, it needs to be emphasised, than bourgeois nationalism.

Sarkar is basically advancing three separate arguments here. One, that retreats and halts led to a general decline in support for the movement, as after 1922, the proof being the decline in Congress membership. Two, that

[97] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, pp. 50–52.

the retreats and halts, which were necessary because of the pro-propertied character of the movements, inhibited the mobilization of the poorer peasantry, tribals and workers (presumably because they could only participate through more "elemental" forms of struggle which tended to be violent) and thus limited the potential strength of the anti-imperialist movement and confined it within bourgeois nationalist limits. Three, the consequence was the exclusion of certain sections and certain movements, such as those involving food riots, tribal violence and anti-landlord agitation, from the ambit of the nationalist mainstream.

As for the first argument of retreats leading to decline in support, it needs to be recognized that the Congress was not a party in the conventional sense of the word, but a movement, and it was inevitable that when a phase of struggle ended, its membership would decline. Enrolment of Congress members was in fact one of the activities, or items of the programme, of the Non-Cooperation Movement; once the movement ended, so did the concerned membership drive. That there was no permanent setback to nationalist influence is shown by the revival of struggle from 1928 onwards, culminating in the Civil Disobedience Movement. In fact, what is involved in Sumit Sarkar's argument here is an assumption that the mass struggle, once begun, could continue endlessly till it achieved its final aims, and that it declined only because it was called off. What is missing in this perception is an understanding of the nature of mass movements, which appear to have their own dynamic of peaks and troughs, of historical conjunctures, which, by their very definition, do not persist endlessly. In the absence of such notions, it is inevitable that one will look for extraneous reasons for the disappearance of such conjunctures or the decline of such movements. However, if one accepts the inevitability of such peaks and troughs in the course of mass movements, then the task of the leadership is clearly to secure for the movement the greatest possible gains by driving hard bargains with the enemy during its periods of strength, bargains which might involve "truce" for some time, as in the Gandhi–Irwin Pact in 1931, or if as in 1922, the enemy is not willing to grant concessions, then to save the movement from complete dissipation by unilaterally announcing its suspension rather than wait for its disintegration and inevitable decline or defeat through repression, which would be infinitely more demoralizing than a unilateral withdrawal. In fact, the one time that Gandhi gave in to pressure for launching a movement when there were no chances of either a victory or a bargain was in 1932 and the movement was ruthlessly suppressed. He suspended it only in 1934, but the movement had been dead for a long time. Similarly, the fact that the Lahore Kisan Morcha in 1939 and the Harsa Chhina Morcha in 1946 were allowed to continue endlessly till all chances of negotiations had disappeared only led to demoralization, whereas the negotiated settlement that brought the Amritsar Kisan Morcha

of 1938 to an honourable end did not lead to any sense of defeat—on the contrary, it was seen as a success. (see Chapters 5 and 6). But that the troughs of the mass movement were not necessarily periods of decline of nationalist influence is shown by the elections of 1937—a massive Congress victory in a phase when no mass struggle was going on—as also by the more limited elections of 1923 in which only one section of the Congress participated.

The second argument of lack of mobilization of poorer peasants, tribals and workers is not factually very correct. In many parts of the country, there is clear evidence of participation by poorer peasants and tribals in the different movements. This argument is, in fact, based on the *assumption* that poorer sections, because they had nothing to gain from the movement in "concrete" terms, did not participate in it or were not mobilized. Or that, because the forms of struggle were not suited to them, given their supposed proclivity for more violent forms, they did not participate. (For a detailed consideration of this issue, see the first section of Chapter 9).

The third argument pertains to the exclusion of certain movements from the mainstream of the national movement. Again, this exclusion is strictly not a fact. The Kisan Sabha movements, as we have argued, were very much a part of the nationalist mainstream. The organizational integration may have been stronger in some cases and weaker in others, but the ideological integration was nonetheless there. Obviously, movements that were avowedly or clearly violent, such as the Rampa rebellion or those that were based on food riots and looting of *hats*, could hardly be integrated with a movement that had non-violence as an integral part of its oppositional strategy; that would have implied a rejection of its own strategy. Even so-called "élite" movements based on a clear avowal of violence, such as those of the revolutionary terrorists, could not be integrated: the exclusion was not reserved for "subaltern" movements.

In the specific context of the relationship between the peasantry and peasant movements and the anti-imperialist movement in colonial India, it is our contention that charges of "betrayal", "surrender", etc., have often been made and the national movement accused of curbing or restraining the militancy of the peasantry without any serious examination of the concrete historical conjunctures in which such alleged betrayals are supposed to have occurred. These accusations are made on the basis of pre-conceived notions, or incorrect assumptions about the bourgeois or reactionary or "élite" character of the national movement and consequently the inevitability of its betrayal of the interests of those whose interests clash with its own, that is, bourgeois or feudal or "élite" as the case may be. Since the betrayal is seen as inevitable, or pre-determined, the necessity of proving it is obviated, and any situation, which half-way resembles class

adjustment or political flexibility in struggle is immediately quoted as "proof" of "betrayal".

Further, in many instances, it is not even considered necessary to at least demonstrate that the peasantry (or any other class) was in fact ready for and capable of carrying on the movement or struggle, or that it resisted or was unhappy with the alleged "restraint" on its activity imposed by the leadership—the very fact that any movement was suspended or withdrawn, and not allowed to peter out or be suppressed and die a natural death is enough proof of the fact that it was "betrayed"—because it was not "permitted" to develop further to reach "greater heights".

I now take up in greater detail a few examples of such characterizations.

The withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement in February 1922 has been quoted ad nauseam as the irrevocable proof of the betrayal of the interests of the peasants in favour of the interests of the zamindars or the bourgeoisie. The fact that Gandhiji gave the violence at Chauri Chaura as the reason for his decision to withdraw the movement has sufficed as proof of his fear that the movement was getting beyond the bounds set by the class interests of the propertied classes, and as proof of the fact that the movement was actually breaking those bounds. This is all the more surprising because those who otherwise refuse to take any of Gandhiji's statements at face value and emphasize that it is not what he says that is important but what he does, accept without reservation, and without any independent analysis of their own, Gandhiji's verbalization of the reasons for his decision, because in this case it fits in neatly with their own expectations and assumptions. For the sceptics, who may still venture to entertain some doubts, the Bardoli resolution is cited, and the fact that, among other things, it asked the peasants to pay up rents and taxes, and desist from violence, is offered as final proof to clinch the argument.

One may, for a start, ask what was incongruous about a resolution that announced the withdrawal of a nation-wide struggle also specifying that those activities that had formed a part of the struggle, that is, non-payment of taxes and rents, be suspended, or reiterating its condemnation of violence as harmful and undesirable? Could Mao, for example, announce a compromise with Chiang-Kai-Shek and not simultaneously order the Communist forces to desist from attacks on Chiang's forces? Did he not scale down his anti-feudal programme in the interests of the anti-imperialist united front and decide that their lands should not be seized and that their rent should be paid? Then even if it can be shown that the Non-Cooperation Movement was withdrawn in order to preserve all-class unity against imperialism, and that this unity was threatened by the actions of some peasants who went too far on the path of class confrontation (though Chauri Chaura was not even that), does it prove anything more than that

the interests of the common struggle dictated class adjustment and not confrontation?[98]

However, in our view, first, there is no evidence to suggest that peasant militancy was about to break the bounds set by the ostensibly upper-class or bourgeois character of the movement, and that was why the movement was withdrawn and that if it had not been withdrawn, possibly the movement would have taken a more revolutionary course and inflicted serious defeats on feudalism and imperialism. In fact, there is ample evidence to show that the movement as a whole, that is, in large parts of the country, had reached its peak in mid-1921 and after that had begun to decline. (This was true not only of the movement in the urban areas but also of the rural areas.) The Kisan Sabha Movement in Oudh reached its peak in early 1921 and declined thereafter. It did not wait for Gandhiji or any other leader to call it off, government repression and natural exhaustion were sufficient for it to lower its head. The Mappila uprising in Kerala, which began as an agrarian uprising, had degenerated into a communal confrontation and had been suppressed by the end of 1921. The only two areas of rural India which showed signs of readiness to struggle were the two or three districts covered by the Eka Movement in the UP and one part of the district of Guntur in Andhra Pradesh which insisted on implementing the no-tax part of the Gandhian programme of non-cooperation. Chauri Chaura expressed the anger of the crowd against particular acts of police repression and did not in any way reflect peasant militancy against the zamindars. It is indeed surprising that the case for the readiness of the Indian peasantry to launch on the path of militant struggle against feudalism and imperialism in February 1922 is made on the basis of parts of two or three disricts in the UP and half or less of a district in Andhra.[99] It is also conveniently forgotten that while the movement in Guntur had no anti-landlord content at all, the Eka Movement also asked only for non-payment of illegal, extra cesses and levies and not even for a reduction of rent.[100] And then the threat of this "militancy" is assumed to be the reason for the leadership's decision of withdrawal.

[98] The classic statement of what became the standard Marxist critique of the decision of withdrawal (and which has been accepted by "subalterns") is to be found in R.P. Dutt, *India Today*, pp. 346–53. Others have mostly repeated his arguments, with variations of their own added on. For details of the Chauri Chaura incident, see S. Choudhary, "Post-War Awakening", in Desai, *Peasant Struggles in India.*, p. 264. It is clear that the attack on the police station was provoked by the overbearing and repressive behaviour of a notorious local police officer.

[99] S. Choudhary, commenting on the Chauri Chaura inspired Bardoli decision of suspending the movement, writes that "the vacillating conduct of the Congress leaders which culminated in the betrayal of the masses led to the growth of independent peasant movements in various parts of the country", but the only example he is able to furnish is that of the Eka Movement which, on his own admission, was an extremely short-lived one. *Ibid.*, pp. 268–70.

[100] See Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India*.

It is equally surprising that the other possible reasons for the decision are not examined or considered.[101] For example, it is not even noticed that, from as early as October 1921, Gandhiji had repeatedly postponed the implementation of the no-tax part of his programme. Efforts for a settlement with the government were made throughout December 1921 and had almost succeeded since the government was keen to ensure peace during the Prince of Wales' visit. Throughout January 1922, Gandhiji continued to postpone the launching of the no-tax campaign and hoped that the deliberations of the All-Parties Conference and his letter to the viceroy might produce some settlement. His decision to launch a no-tax movement in Bardoli *Taluqa*, and only in Bardoli *Taluqa*, was taken after all these efforts had failed and any further postponement would amount to a unilateral surrender. It is entirely possible that Chauri Chaura was for him only the last straw, the final proof he needed of his already growing conviction that any further prolonging of the movement was unviable and possibly harmful, that the movement was petering out and could not be sustained and could now only produce isolated and desperate acts of violence and anger which would give the government the opportunity to move in and suppress an already weak movement.[102]

In such a situation, it is our view, Gandhiji made the unpleasant but to him necessary decision—unpleasant because for a leader to unilaterally withdraw a movement, that is, tacitly admit defeat, cannot but be unpleasant—of unilaterally withdrawing the movement. It is another matter that he rationalized this decision in this case by focusing on the violence at Chauri Chaura.

Further, it is also surprising that the fact that no peasant resistance either continued or appeared after the announcement of withdrawal, that there is no concrete evidence that the peasantry resisted this decision, the fact that in Guntur taxes were paid up rapidly and the Eka Movement petered out, is not even sought to be explained or accounted for. We are never enlightened on how this militant, revolutionary peasantry passively accepted Gandhiji's decision to withdraw their "autonomous" struggle?

[101] Sarkar essentially repeats R.P. Dutt's arguments about the reasons for the withdrawal of the Non-Cooperation Movement after Chauri Chaura. He does, however, show some awareness of the weakness of the movement, but the weakness for him lies in the fact that "there was nothing at all in the way of an alternative revolutionary leadership". That, as he himself notes, "there was not a ripple of protest anywhere in India as Gandhi went to jail" on 10 March 1922—as contrasted to the upsurge that followed Gandhiji's arrest on 5 May 1930 at the height of the Civil Disobedience Movement—is not indicative for him of some more basic weaknesses at the level of the movement itself. Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 226.

[102] For a detailed consideration of the course of the Non-Cooperation Movement, its ups and downs, in the context of which this argument is made, see Mridula Mukherjee, "The Non-Cooperation Movement—1920–22", in Chandra, et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Chapter 15.

Much has also been made of the reaction of the other "bourgeois" leaders of the Congress to Gandhiji's decision. Their expressions of surprise and dismay when they heard in jail (where they had all been for at least the past two months or more) that the movement was withdrawn are quoted as further proof of the fact that it was only Gandhiji's abhorrence of violence and fear of militancy which led to the withdrawal, and not any weakness in the movement itself. It is again surprising that in this context, first, Nehru's later statement, that though they had all reacted strongly to the withdrawal of the movement, Gandhiji was perhaps right, and that the movement itself was going to pieces, is ignored. Second, the opinion of those leaders who were in jail and out of touch with the immediate reality, the day-to-day course of the struggle, is given more importance than the judgement of the man who had from the beginning been accepted, by the same persons, as the leader of the movement who was to decide its techniques, its timing, etc. Third, the more considered and unanimous opinion of the Civil Disobedience Enquiry Committee (which included some of the same leaders who had earlier in February 1922 been dismayed by Gandhiji's decision)—set up by the Congress in 1922 to specifically examine the question of whether the country was ready for civil disobedience or not—that the country was not ready for civil disobedience, that is, for a phase of mass struggle, is totally ignored. And fourth, it is not at all clear as to how the opinion of the more moderate "bourgeois" leaders, some of whom had in 1920 opposed the launching of the Non-Cooperation Movement itself, and many of whom later took to constitutional work, that the movement should not have been withdrawn, strengthens the hypothesis that the bourgeoisie or the reactionaries withdrew the movement out of fear of mass militancy. If this was the cause of the decision, how was it that the "bourgeois" leaders inside jail did not share this fear?[103]

In fact, the divergence of opinion in February 1922 within the Congress on the question of the withdrawal, a divergence in which Motilal Nehru and C.R. Das, the two supposedly most "bourgeois" of the leaders of the Congress since they led it into a constitutionalist course, were on the side of continuation of the movement, only shows that the considerations before the leadership were tactical and those relating to the capacity of the movement to continue, and that those who were in jail, and who unlike Gandhiji had no previous experience of leading mass movements, probably over-estimated the capacity of the people to continue the struggle and thus disagreed with the decision to withdraw, whereas Gandhiji who had his finger much more accurately on the pulse of the movement as also a greater experience as well as capacity as a leader of mass struggles, was

[103] Sarkar, predictably, does not make this error; he argues that "the disagreement was probably no more than tactical, over a question of timing". Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 225–26.

able to make a more correct assessment and decided to unilaterally withdraw the movement. To quote Gandhiji himself:[104]

> A wise general does not wait till he is actually routed; he withdraws in time in an orderly manner from a position which he knows he would not be able to hold.

This alternative scenario of the withdrawal of 1922 is presented not as a definitive statement on the subject—far from it—but only to indicate the existence of alternate possibilities and explanations that need to be explored before categorical statements about the reasons for the withdrawal are made.

Another example that drives home the necessity of exploring alternative explanations before declaring any instance of class adjustment as proof of the pro-propertied or "élite" character of the national movement and its leadership is that of the Quit India Movement of 1942. In this movement, by all accounts, the class adjustment was done by the people on their own. To quote Sarkar:[105]

> Unlike in 1919–22 and 1930–34, the radicalisation process in 1942 was on the whole mainly at the level of anti-British militancy alone, with the very extent of anti-foreign sentiments, as in 1857, possibly reducing internal class tensions and social radicalism. 'The characteristic feature of this movement was that private property was not attacked' recalls the '42 activist Govind Sahai.... Though British authority virtually disappeared for some weeks over large parts of eastern UP and north Bihar, there was only one attack on private property in Azamgarh district (the estate of an absentee white zamindar) and, despite a strong and recent Kisan Sabha tradition in that area, Darbhanga raj officials noted with relief that rent-collection had remained unaffected.

Sarkar notes this significant feature of the Quit India Movement but fails to assess its implications. If the 1942 rebellion was, as is argued by Sarkar and others of the "subaltern" school, so militant because it was largely "autonomous", the top leadership being in jail and not able to give directions or lead the movement away from its radical path, then why did it fail to become socially radical? If it was the "élite" leadership that was consistently responsible for preventing the movement from assuming a socially radical, that is, anti-landlord, anti-moneylender character, then what prevented it from assuming this character in 1942? If it broke through the bounds of "middle class nationalism" with regard to non-violence; why could it not break through its class collaborationist bounds? If the "very extent of anti-foreign sentiments" spontaneously reduced internal class

[104] *Mahatma Gandhi; Collected Works*, Vol. 67, p. 420.

[105] Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 48–49.

tensions in 1942, does it not imply that a concentration or heightening of anti-imperialist feeling, even when this is not being directed "from the top", "autonomously" leads to a reduction of focus on the internal class tensions or secondary contradictions? Then can it be argued with conviction that it was the "élite" which was responsible for deflecting the "subalterns" from their "natural", socially radical path, by exercising "control"? The élite can then at best be held responsible for not playing a more effective guiding role in introducing greater social radicalism into the "spontaneous" movement and consciousness of the subalterns. But then that would be a very different argument from the one made by the "subaltern" school, since it would imply a greater and not lesser degree of "élite" initiative and would erode the notion of "subaltern" "autonomy". But, surprisingly, instead of raising such questions, Sarkar concludes his discussion of 1942 with the following statement: "Middle class nationalist ideology ... could also at times inhibit the articulation of class demands...."[106] This is a very odd conclusion, to say the least, in the context of his argument that the 1942 movement was an example of a situation in which the masses were radicalized because of the arrest of the leaders, that is, when "control" could no longer be exercised. In such a situation, to explain lack of radicalism by the limitations of middle-class ideology is clearly unsatisfactory within the logic of his own conceptual framework. Or, at least, the argument is ambiguous.

In *our* view, what the experience of 1942 shows is that perhaps it was in the very logic of things that secondary contradictions between indigenous social classes were underplayed in a period of the sharpening of the primary contradiction, and, at points when this contradiction was the sharpest, as during phases of active struggle as in 1942, they were even ignored. So that, if this is what the Congress and Gandhi were doing as a conscious policy, they were only working out the logic of the given situation, and not imposing their own "bourgeois" or "reactionary" logic on a situation otherwise ripe for social struggle.

Interestingly, this refusal to explore alternative explanations appears to be reserved for the "bourgeois" or "official" leadership of the Congress. For in the case of Communists or Communist-led movements, alternative explanations are explored and even accepted. For example, on the failure of the Tebhaga Movement, Sarkar writes:

> ... when the League ministry balanced its sop of a bargadar bill ... with intensified repression from February 1947, the movement faced a crisis which proved fatal. 20 Santals were killed near Balurghat in a clash with the police, and Sunil Sen lists 49 peasant martyrs in all. Some peasant militants now wanted arms, but the Communists did not have them and in any case had not really envisaged an all-out armed struggle. Socially, too, limitations were emerging: tribal elements pressed for greater

[106] *Ibid.*, p. 49.

> militancy ... but middle and poor peasant support declined, while in north Bengal towns the professional groups which were the mainstay of the national movement were extremely hostile. The Communists planned a general strike on 28 March (1947), but meanwhile the Hindu Mahasabha campaign for Bengal partition was gaining strength, and renewed riots in Calcutta from 27 March ended all prospects of sympathetic action in urban areas.[107]

No attempt is made here to argue that lack of radicalism or restraints imposed by the leadership led to the collapse of the movement. Repression, growth of communalism, lack of urban support: these are sufficient explanations for decline. Nor are the middle class or urban elements identified as part of the "élite" stream; on the contrary their lack of support is seen as a cause of the decline of the movement. Nor is any attempt made to distinguish between leaders "from above" and the movement "from below". Nor is the greater militancy of the tribal elements and their pushing for resort to armed struggle, and the refusal of their demand by the leadership, made the occasion for arguing that the leaders betrayed the masses.

Similarly, the explanation for the social base of the Communist-led Kisan Sabha movements being confined to "peasants with some, at times considerable land", and the absence of agricultural labourers in Kisan Sabha ranks is found in the constraints of the "objective situation". If the Communists took up the demands of the agricultural labourers, they would expose themselves to "the danger of isolation and alienation from the bulk of the peasantry", because "a crucial feature of the Indian rural scene is that the most oppressed sections, adivasis and Harijans, are a minority, and their oppressors include not only landlords and big farmers but also small peasants" and therefore the Communist policy made "perfectly good political sense for a long time". But the explanation for the supposedly limited social base of Gandhian movements among relatively better-off peasants in relatively prosperous regions (a generalization itself open to question) is found only in "the general style of Gandhian nationalism (which) was geared objectively to the interests of the landholding intermediate-caste peasant proprietors or tenants and not to the subordinate stratum of tribal or low-caste agricultural labourers, share croppers, and poorest peasants".[108] If indeed the social base of the Gandhian movements was confined to the same kind of peasants as that of the Communist-led Kisan Sabha movements, then the same constraints of the "objective situation", the same "danger of isolation and alienation from the bulk of the peasantry" and the same need for an "all peasant unity" are not brought in as explanations. Is it impossible that what made "perfectly good political sense" for the Communists also

[107] Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 440–41.

[108] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, pp. 63–69.

made perfectly good political sense for the leadership of the national movement? One gets a sense here of the use of double standards—in some cases the constraints of the "objective situation" are brought in to explain a set of actions; in other situations, these disappear and their place is taken by ideological motivation or class interest.

In reality, even Communist leaders of the peasant movement had to practise class adjustment. For example, in Punjab, the Communist leadership took a considered decision to concentrate the fire of the tenants' struggle in the Nili Bar and other canal colonies on landlords who owned *more than 1,000 acres* and exempt those who owned less. This decision was not even taken in the initial phase but in 1946–47, when the movement had been in existence for almost a decade and already had a fairly strong base. The motivation was to neutralize the smaller landlords so that they did not range themselves against the movement[109]—a motivation hardly distinguishable from that of the national leaders and especially Gandhiji when they urged that the level of the demands made by the movement remain in consonance with its own strength and not be allowed to escalate in a manner that increased the number and strength of its enemies before it had acquired the capacity and ability to at least give them a good fight, if not win the battle against them.

Similarly, Communist leaders also took up those issues for struggle which united the different sections of the peasantry and did not take up issues which would tend to divide. Reform of the land revenue system, reduction of existing taxes, prevention of increases in taxes, abolition of unpopular cesses, reduction of the debt burden and protection from the moneylender were issues that were of concern to most sections of peasants, and even those not directly affected by one or the other of these demands at least had nothing to lose if they were won and therefore would not oppose them. However, issues such as increase in wages of agricultural labour, or, in the central districts, the issue of any change in the system of *batai* or reduction of cash rents—issues which would create divisions within the peasants—were left well alone.[110] This was not because, as argued by some, the Communist leaders who were from a peasant background had become the organic intellectuals of the landowning peasantry and could only articulate their interests.[111] It is difficult to accept that they did not have the capacity to transcend their class origins when they had given enough proof of their commitment to their egalitarian ideal by suffering all manner of privations in its pursuit. It was no different in the case of even the non-left

[109] Interview with Chhajju Mal Vaid, a close associate of Teja Singh Swatantar.

[110] Interviews with Harkishen Singh Surjeet, Master Hari Singh, Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri and G.S. Randhawa.

[111] This argument has been advanced in Bhagwan Josh, *Communist Movement in Punjab*, p. 204.

nationalist leaders who had also given as much proof of their capacity to suffer and work for ideals considerably larger than personal power or self-advancement or advance of the interests of their class, caste or religious community. Class adjustment was actuated, in the peasant movement as well as in the national movement, by the needs of unity in struggle.

A similar disregard for the necessity of examining concrete circumstances and alternative explanation for a particular incident of "compromise" or "withdrawal" has led to unfounded characterizations of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact as a "betrayal" of the peasantry in the interests of the bourgeoisie.[112] For example, discussing the impact of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact, Pandey attributes the decline in the no-rent campaign in UP in the second half of 1931 to the change in Congress policy after the Gandhi–Irwin agreement of March 1931. Ignoring his own evidence, which shows that even during the "truce" period Congress actions such as Gandhi's Manifesto to the Kisans, to pay only 50 or 60 per cent of rent or as much as they could, were strengthening peasant resistance to payment of rent, and which also shows that even before the end of the "truce", in November 1931, the UP Congress again officially re-launched the no-rent campaign and that it was the government "policy of simultaneous concession and repression" which was leading to the decline of resistance, Pandey argues that it was Congress's change of stance, its "sacrifice of the interests of the most deprived sections of its rural following in the name of what it believed to be the 'unity of the nation'" that led to the "decline of peasant resistance in the latter half of 1931."[113] Sarkar, too, echoes the same, though with his characteristic ambiguity:[114]

> It is true that the consequences of the Truce were much more ambiguous than those of the unilateral Bardoli withdrawal, for the Delhi Agreement did enhance Congress prestige and infuriated many bureaucrats. Yet the studies of Pandey of UP, Hardiman of Gujarat, and Stoddart of Andhra all agree that the Truce had very adverse consequences so far as the Congress political base among the peasantry was concerned: "The Gandhi–Irwin Pact broke the spirit of the Patidar peasants far more effectively than the *lathis* of the police.

Contrast this generalization with the evidence present in Pandey's work:[115]

[112] For a detailed refutation of the theory that it was "business pressure" which led to the Congress going in for the truce in 1931, see Aditya Mukherjee, *Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Making of the Indian Capitalist Class,* New Delhi, 2002, Chapter 2.
[113] Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 176, 180, 187–88.
[114] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 51.
[115] Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 129–30.

> While the calling off of the movement and the terms of the Gandhi–Irwin Pact caused disappointment in certain quarters represented in the upper echelons of the Congress leadership by Jawaharlal Nehru and Subhash Chandra Bose, to the majority of Congressmen in the districts and the towns the pact appeared as it was painted by their leaders—a great victory; their colleagues came out of gaol, their newspapers resumed publication and the resourceness of the police and officials boosted their self-confidence.

In Punjab, too, as demonstrated at great length in Chapter 3, Section 3, the pact was seen by the people as a clear victory and acted as a spur to an intensified peasant struggle for remissions in government taxes and generated a momentum that was not even checked by the quick grant of generous remissions by the government. There is no evidence of the pact having broken the spirit of the Punjab peasants, on the contrary it led to a firming up of their spirit and, as testified by the governor himself, to a great increase in defiance of authority and a considerable sharpening of the tone of the activists. On the contrary, it was the bureaucracy that found its hands and feet tied by the pact and it was unable to use the kind of repression it happily let loose to successfully curb peasant militancy once the pact was dissolved with the resumption of Civil Disobedience at the end of the year.

The transfer of power in 1947 is also seen as the Indian bourgeoisie's or Congress leadership's compromise settlement with imperialism out of fear of the popular upsurge among peasants and workers and the growing power of the left-wing. To quote Desai:[116]

> ... the Congress Party accepted an unprincipled partition of India on communal lines.... The creative, mass upsurge, which took place in India during the war and immediate post-war periods was not systematically organised to evolve a strategy of counteracting the machination of the British or the communal diplomacy of the Muslim League.... The Congress could have avoided the partition of India, prevented the spread of communal frenzy in the country ... and ushered in a totally different phase of the freedom movement.

Sarkar, too, holds a similar position.[117]

> The socially radical movements of which Telengana was the climax never coalesced into an organised and effective countrywide political alternative. The fear they undoubtedly inspired, however, helped to bring about the final compromise by which a "peaceful" transfer of power was purchased at the cost of Partition and a communal holocaust.

[116] A.R. Desai, Introduction to Part V, in A.R. Desai, *Peasant Struggles in India*, pp. 415–16.
[117] Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 446.

However, those who see the "peaceful" or "negotiated" character of the transfer of power as proof of the compromising tendencies of the national leadership tend to forget that even armed struggles for liberation often end up in peaceful and negotiated final settlements, Vietnam being a good example of this process. The peoples' liberation struggle in Guinea Bissau and Cape Verde, led by the famous revolutionary Amilcar Cabral, repeatedly demanded that the Portuguese government make a peaceful settlement with them. In the Indian case, the peaceful transfer of power was not an aberration at all, it was an inherent part of the basic strategy of the national movement.[118] It is neither possible nor necessary for us to counter all such characterizations, our main point here is that they are made largely on the basis of pre-conceived assumptions either, as in the case of the "subalterns", about the "élite" character of the "official" national movement or, as in the case of traditional Marxists, about the "vacillating" and "compromising" character of the "bourgeois-led" national movement.

Similarly, pre-conceived notions about the lack of understanding of the strategy of the national movement, the forms of struggle it adopted and the issue of violence versus non-violence, vitiate the discussion of the relationship between the peasantry and the national movement.

For example, the fact that the strategy of the Indian national movement was one of a long-drawn out hegemonic struggle, of phases of mass struggle interspersed with phases of constitutional struggle and not one of an all-out insurrectionary seizure of power, that is, a war of position rather than a war of manoeuvre, or a combination of war of position (phases of constitutional struggle) and war of manoeuvre (phases of mass struggle), is interpreted as proof of the vacillating and compromising character of the Indian national movement and the Indian bourgeoisie and not seen as a particular strategy of national revolution, conditioned to a considerable extent by the semi-hegemonic character of the colonial state. Thus, the ending of every phase of mass struggle was greeted by the left and is interpreted by some historians today as "surrender" and "compromise" with imperialism. The fact that each mass phase was

[118] For a full-length critique of this view, see Sucheta Mahajan, *Independence and Partition: The Erosion of Colonial Power in India*, New Delhi, 2000. Also see Sucheta Mahajan, "British Policy, Nationalist Strategy and the Popular National Upsurge, 1945–46", in A.K. Gupta, ed., *Myth and Reality—Struggle for Freedom, 1945–47*, New Delhi, 1987. For negotiated settlements being a basic part of the strategy of the Indian national movement, see Bipan Chandra, "Elements of Continuity and Change in the Early Nationalist Activity", in Chandra, *Nationalism and Colonialism in Modern India*, Chandra, *Indian National Movement* and Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*. For a critique of the view that fear of the left and pressure from the bourgeoisie led to the "quick" transfer of power, see Aditya Mukherjee, *Imperialism, Nationalism, and the Making of the Indian Capitalist Class*, Chapter 2.

followed after an interval by another even more active mass phase of struggle is ignored,[119] or explained by the notion of "vacillation" or "pressure from below". Further, the specificity of the strategy of hegemonic struggle is that it is geared to the extension of the hegemonic influence and not to the winning of one or more specific demands, that in this strategy a change of tactics, such as that reflected in withdrawal of specific movements, is not tantamount to defeat, that what is critical is not whether the immediate demands have been fulfilled or whether a change of tactics has occurred, but whether the hegemonic influence of the movement and its ideology has been extended.

The question of forms of struggle is also often discussed in an abstract and not historically specific manner. Violent forms of struggle are assumed to be revolutionary *per se* and non-violent forms as non-revolutionary or a product of the interests of the propertied classes. It is assumed that violence would have resulted in more socially radical movements that sought fundamental agrarian transformation. Radicalism becomes then a function of methods of struggle and not of the ideological or programmatic content or stance of a movement.[120] Going even further, Ranajit Guha so completely misses the historical specificity of non-violent forms of struggle in the Indian national movement that he equates or rather collapses them with constitutional and legalistic forms.[121] He does not recognize that mobilization in the Indian national movement was neither primarily legalistic or constitutional nor primarily violent, but non-violent and non-constitutional or simultaneously non-violent and illegal or rather extra-legal. To fail to understand this is to miss completely the specificity of the Gandhian political method and what distinguished it from earlier moderate or contemporary liberal methods of constitutional agitation as well as from violent and insurrectionary methods. Gandhi's uniqueness lay in devising a method of political action that was simultaneously non-constitutionalist or illegal, that is, it was based on defiance of the law, and peaceful. A perspective which fails to locate peaceful or non-violent methods within the spectrum of illegal forms of struggle (which constantly question the authority of the state) and recognizes only violent ones as illegal, fails to comprehend the very dynamic of mass mobilization in the Gandhi-led national movement of the Indian people.

Given this perspective, Gandhi's insistence on non-violence is seen as evidence of his concern for the interests of the landlords and other propertied

[119] For a full discussion of the strategy of hegemonic struggle evolved by the Indian national movement, see Chandra, *Indian National Movement* and Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence,* 1988.

[120] This aspect has been discussed at length in Chapter 9.

[121] "Élite mobilisation tended to be relatively more legalistic and constitutionalist in orientation, subaltern mobilisation relatively more violent." Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", pp. 4–5.

sections and not even sought to be understood in terms of the overall strategy of the national movement. An important insight into the character of mass movements made by Jawaharlal Nehru and Bhagat Singh, that mass movements (as distinct from terrorist action or guerilla activity) necessarily have to take a non-violent character, has been completely ignored both by their contemporaries as well as by later historians who have discussed the question of violence *versus* non-violence.[122] The fact that, in a hegemonic struggle, the use of violence leads to the erosion of the hegemony of those who use it, that one of the major effects of non-violent struggle in India was the erosion of the hegemony of the British government when it used violence to suppress non-violent agitations, that the non-violent methods succeeded in placing the British government in a classic "damned if you do, damned if you don't" fix, that is, if it did not suppress the movement, its administrative authority was undermined and its control shown to be weak, and if did, it was seen as a brutal, anti-people government that used violence on non-violent agitators, is not recognized. The fact that use of violence by the movement could have made the task of its suppression easier for the government in hegemonic terms, and that this suppression could have decimated and demoralized the movement is not even considered; and if use of violence by the movement would have made suppression easier for the government, then can it be argued that violence is necessarily more revolutionary than non-violence or that a strategy based on violence is necessarily more viable in every situation than one based on non-violence? If non-violence enabled vast masses, including peasants, to participate actively in the struggle, if it protected them and the movement from unbridled suppression, if it eroded the hegemony of the enemy by forcing it to use violence against a non-violent movement, then can the use of non-violence necessarily, and without any counter argument, be seen as having had a negative effect on the movement and on the militancy of its followers?

The non-viability of a violent insurrectionary strategy for seizure of power in the specific context of colonial India is shown by the example of the fate of the Quit India Movement. That it assumed a violent form was perhaps inevitable in the given circumstances: the Defence of India Rules under which the country was being governed limited the scope of non-violent protest; meetings and demonstrations being almost totally banned. Severe repression, again occasioned by the British decision not to tolerate any disturbance of the war effort, acted as a further spur to violent action. The movement, which assumed in some parts of the country the form of a major revolt, and which had behind it the support of wide sections of the

[122] For this, as well as for a general discussion of the place of non-violence in the strategy of the Indian national movement, see Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, pp. 46–53.

population, could survive for only a few weeks (or at most a few months in a few pockets) taking advantage of the unpreparedness and temporary weakness of the administrative machinery. For when the full weight of that administrative machinery, including its military wing, was brought to bear, the movement collapsed. Therefore, though the Quit India Movement was perhaps the most popular and broad-based of all the major national struggles, it was also the briefest. It did not lead to the overthrow of British rule: its significance was therefore not in terms of holding out an alternative model for capture of state power. Its significance was the same as that of other nationalist initiatives—it demonstrated both the widespread support that the national movement had gathered as well as the erosion of support for and acceptance of or acquiescence in British colonial rule.[123]

In conclusion, I would like to state that the effort in this chapter has been to delineate and, when necessary, critique the methodological and conceptual assumptions that inform much of the existing historiography of the relationship between peasants, peasant movements and the national movement in colonial India. The attempt has also been to question some of the stereotypes and ready answers and to replace certainties with doubts. When alternative hypotheses have been suggested, the intention is to indicate the range of possibility of alternative explanations and not to provide "the answer". Historiography can advance only if it steps back every once in a while to take a critical look at itself, assess its weaknesses and consolidate its strengths. But if the subject of its concerns and attention is the intricate network of many hued threads that bind together something as inscrutable as the peasantry and something as vast as the national movement, then there is even less room for any complacency: only a continuous and rigorous self-assessment can create the space for its advancement.

[123] For a detailed discussion of the Quit India Movement in the context of the overall strategy of the national movement that was based on non-violence, see Mridula Mukherjee, "The Quit India Movement and the INA", in Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Chapter 35.

NINE

Peasants and Non-Violence: Forms of Protest and Methods of Mobilization

What were the forms that peasants adopted when they decided to express their class or national discontent or their vision of their future and their memories of the past in overt political action? Did they petition, or did they join huge demonstrations or rallies? Did they form *jathas* or did they fight cases in the courts? Did they go on a violent rampage or did they sit patiently but stubbornly for days on the pavement in Lahore asking the government to fulfil its promises of grant of land to ex-soldiers? Did they seize land physically or did they organize a *satyagraha* to press their claims? And how were they mobilized? Through door-to-door calls by activists or through the press or via orders of caste assemblies or religious *hukamnamas* and *fatwas*? What were the new forms they evolved and what were the old ones they continued? These are some of the questions to which answers will be sought in this chapter.

The answers are difficult to seek, however, without first clearing the deck, so to speak, of the issue of violence *versus* non-violence. This issue has so bedevilled the discussion on popular resistance in colonial India and has occupied so overwhelming a degree of historiographical attention that till the dust raised by this controversy has settled, and the issue placed in its context, it is difficult to even perceive clearly the other equally important, if not richer, features of popular resistance and paint a clearer picture of peasant protest.

Violent versus Non-Violent Forms of Protest

Ever since the left emerged as an important current in Indian political life in the 1920s, the assumption that non-violence was the ultimate proof of

being reactionary, or pro-landlord and pro-bourgeois, and violence of being revolutionary or pro-peasant and pro-worker or pro-poor, has been the staple of left-wing critiques of popular protest.[1] More recently, it has been asserted by the high priest of the subaltern faith that a major feature of "subaltern" or popular protest, that which distinguishes it from élite politics, was that it tended to be more violent, whereas élite politics "tended to be relatively more legalistic and constitutionalist in orientation".[2] And since "subaltern" politics is *per se* more revolutionary than élite politics,[3] it is axiomatic that violent forms of struggle, which are the "subaltern" forms of struggle, are *per se* more revolutionary than non-violent forms of struggle, which are "élite" forms of struggle. Thus, the choice of forms of protest is seen to be directly linked to whether one belongs to the world of the "subalterns" or to world of the "élite"; in fact, the nature of the choice is proof of belonging to one or the other "domain".

The implicit assumption that violence is equal to revolutionariness and its adoption or use is proof of the existence of revolutionary objectives and intentions cannot be sustained on many counts. First, violent forms of struggle have been adopted, throughout history, by all manner of social groups, including "élites". To take just two examples from outside India: the process of the overthrow of feudalism in Europe, epitomized in the French Revolution of 1789, was accompanied by violent conflict in which the rising bourgeois groups, the new "élite", along with peasants and other "plebians", often adopted violent forms of struggle; and surely the difference between the revolutionary Communist-led liberation struggle in China and the Kuomintang Nationalist "élite" movement did not lie in propensity towards use of violence! Closer home, there is the classic example of the Revolt of 1857, in which members of the traditional "élite", zamindars, princes, etc., along with soldiers, peasants, townsmen, engaged the British in bitter violent warfare.[4] In earlier times as well, local overlords and zamindars, with or without peasant support, often violently resisted the attempts of the Mughal rulers to assert their authority. The examples could be multiplied *ad infinitum*. Thus, use of violence neither qualifies one for being accepted as a member of the "subaltern" domain nor for membership of the "revolutionary" club. Violence is not, nor has it ever been, a prerogative of the "subalterns".

[1] See Chapter 8, Section IIB.

[2] Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", p. 4.

[3] See, for example, Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, p. 4; Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress,* pp. 28–29; and Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 7.

[4] In this context, it is significant that Ranajit Guha glosses over the fact that the "élites" formed a major part of the leadership of the revolt of 1857. This "aspect" of the character of the insurgency is never discussed. See Guha, "The Prose of Counter-Insurgency", in Guha, *Subaltern Studies II*.

On the contrary, one's choice of forms of struggle, whether violent or non-violent, legal or illegal, constitutional or non-constitutional, is basically determined neither by one's position in the social hierarchy, nor even by the nature of the demands one is making on the system, that is, by the aims of the struggle, though both have a role in such determination. The choice is largely determined by, or is linked to, the nature of the political structure of the state in which one is operating. And here one can distinguish broadly between two types of state structures or political set ups—those that are hegemonic or semi-hegemonic and those that are non-hegemonic or autocratic or authoritarian. The ruling classes in hegemonic or semi-hegemonic state structures—the foundations of whose authority do not rest primarily or solely on force or coercion but more, or also, on the strength of their institutions and ideological apparatuses that structure the hegemonic ideology over the whole of society, who operate with the notion that they rule largely through consent and not through coercion—are compelled and propelled, by the very nature of their structure, to provide space for non-coercive, peaceful and "legitimate" forms of dissidence and protest. If they do not, they bring into question the hegemonic foundations of their own rule, expose its coercive underpinnings, thus bringing about a weakening of their own hegemony over civil society and the state. However, while being compelled to allow non-coercive forms of protest, they are simultaneously able to disallow, without losing or greatly weakening their hegemony, coercive or violent forms of protest. They are even able to use force to crush those who take to coercive forms of protest, without bringing into question the hegemonic foundations of their authority, if they are able to show that the societal consensus on non-use of coercion is being violated by those who are resorting to coercive forms of protest and their own use of force is only intended to enforce the societal consensus. In this manner, they are able to crush and deny legitimacy to coercive forms of protest. In these situations, therefore, protest and resistance tend to take on—not automatically, but through a process of trial and error and debate—a peaceful, non-violent or non-coercive form, if they are to be viable and effective and seen as legitimate by civil society as a whole, including the exploited and dominated classes or strata.[5]

Non-hegemonic or autocratic or authoritarian state structures, however, provide little or no space for non-coercive and peaceful forms of dissidence and resistance, or such space gets exhausted very quickly. Being based much more clearly and openly on autocratic assertion of authority rather than on the building up of ideological hegemony or consent through complex

[5] For a discussion of the relationship between the semi-hegemonic nature of the British colonial state in India and the strategy of hegemonic struggle evolved by the Indian national movement, see Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, pp. 16–22.

institutions, ideologies and ideological apparatuses, they tend to come down with a heavy hand on all forms of dissidence and protest. Therefore, since non-coercive forms of protest are allowed only a very limited existence or even no space at all, resistance tends to take on a coercive and often violent character. And since it is clear that non-coercive forms are both ineffectual and incapable of being sustained, because of the very nature of the state structure that tends to snuff them out, the alternative coercive methods and forms of resistance acquire a legitimacy in the eyes of the people.

It is perhaps necessary here to clarify that by making a distinction between hegemonic or semi-hegemonic and non-hegemonic or autocratic or authoritarian state structures, the attempt is not at all to deny that even those political structures that are characterized as non-hegemonic have many hegemonic elements or features and *vice-versa*. One would, in fact, tend to agree at a general level with E.P. Thompson that "very rarely in history—and then only for short intervals—does any ruling class exercise authority by direct and unmediated military or even economic force,"[6] and would even urge that this suggests that even basically non-hegemonic struggles would include, if they are effective, many elements of hegemonic struggle. Nevertheless, it is still important to assess the precise degree of the strength of the hegemonic or non-hegemonic elements in any specific political structure, if one is to discern its defining quality. Without this, the appropriateness or otherwise of specific strategies and forms of struggle cannot be discussed and evaluated.

Apart from the nature or character of the state, that is, its hegemonic or non-hegemonic character, which we have discussed earlier, it is also its power, that is, its capacity to repress, its administrative efficiency and the force at its command, that influences and determines the nature or forms of protest. If the administrative machinery of the state, its police and military arms, its financial capacity to bear the costs of repression, are all in good order, then it is likely that the cost of violent revolt against it may be so high and the possibility of its success appear so remote that people may hesitate or refrain from resorting to such forms.

For example, many contemporary oppositional movements operating within and seeking to transform non- or semi-hegemonic political structures have chosen the path of largely non-violent mass mobilization and protest rather than the path of violent insurrection—the examples that immediately come to mind are Lech Walesa's Solidarity Movement in Poland, which consciously eschewed violence and acknowledged its debt to Gandhiji, other movements that brought about the sweeping changes in

[6] E.P. Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology, and Social History", in the *Indian Historical Review*, 3, 2, January 1977, p. 254.

the erstwhile socialist countries of Eastern Europe and in what used to be the Soviet Union, the environment and peace movements in Europe, as well as the movement for democracy against Marcos in the Philippines and in South Korea. It is not unlikely that the enormous power and reach of the contemporary repressive state apparatuses has been a factor in determining the nature of the choice.[7] Another factor influencing the choice could be, as discussed earlier, the necessity of waging hegemonic struggle even against non- or semi-hegemonic political structures, given the presence of hegemonic elements within them.

Conversely, if the state structure itself is in a crisis, if it is weak and disorganized and its capacity to suppress is in question, then the tendency to pose a physical and violent challenge to its authority will be stronger, the costs will seem less severe and the possibility of success much greater. For the Chinese revolution, the importance of this aspect has been widely recognized. Bianco, for example, states that "peasant disturbances could occur more readily in connection with such political factors as the semi-anarchy or chaos which prevailed in parts of the Chinese countryside".[8] The role of the strength or weakness of the state in influencing the possibilities of violent challenges to its authority has also been recognized more recently by Theda Skocpol and James Scott, though within very different frameworks. Skocpol, in her now celebrated study of social revolutions in France, Russia and China in a comparative historical framework, emphasizes that successful social revolutions based on widespread peasant revolts occur when the state structure itself is in crisis for various reasons.[9] Scott lays stress on the other side of what is the same coin and holds that the high cost of violent resistance against powerful state structures is one factor that inhibits frequent recourse to this violent means of protest.[10] (Neither of them, however, make a distinction between hegemonic and non-hegemonic state structures and therefore miss out on many specificities conditioned by this distinction—but this is an argument to which I shall return later.)

[7] It is possible to argue, therefore, that the enormous repressive powers that modern technology has given to the contemporary modern states, combined with the increasingly hegemonic character of the state structures is more than likely to increase the relevance of strategies of social transformation based on non-violence. In fact, non-violence may soon become, if it has not already, an essential ingredient of viable strategies of social change, in many, if not most parts of the world.

[8] Lucien Bianco, "Peasants and Revolution: The Case of China", in *Journal of Peasant Studies*, 2, 3, April 1975.

[9] Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia and China*, Cambridge, 1979.

[10] James C. Scott, *Weapons of the Weak: Everyday Forms of Peasant Resistance*, First Indian edition, Delhi, 1990, (first published in 1985). In Scott's argument, this also contributes to a reliance on everyday forms of resistance as a more effective way of securing peasant aims.

I shall also illustrate these generalizations by means of a comparison between peasant movements in British India, which, in my view, had a semi-hegemonic state structure, an efficient administrative set-up and considerable force and resources at its command, and peasant movements in some of the princely Indian states, most of which by and large had non-hegemonic, autocratic or authoritarian political structures and were also much less efficiently organized and whose military and other forces had fallen into considerable disarray due to their dependence on the British government for protection against both foreign invasion and internal threat. I have selected for comparison only those movements that were led by left-wing, mostly Communist, groups who had no ideological or moral inhibitions about resort to force and in whose ideology there was in fact a predilection, rather than an aversion, towards use of violent forms of protest.

A survey of left-led peasant movements in British India immediately reveals that they remained almost wholly—that is, except for stray, unorganized and individualistic acts of violence—non-violent in character. This is true of the Kisan Sabha movements that emerged in Punjab, Bihar, Bengal, coastal Andhra, Kerala and the UP in the 1930s, and it is also true of the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal and the Varli tribals' struggle in Maharashtra in 1946. There is no evidence of these movements developing along violent insurrectionary lines. Whatever little violence took place was sporadic and usually indulged in by the forces of repression or was a local and limited response to specific acts of extreme repression.[11] Nor was the scale of this violence much greater than that which occurred, in spite of Congress disavowal of violence, in Congress-led movements such as the Civil Disobedience Movement of the 1930s.[12] These left-led peasant struggles were not characterized by organized attempts to physically confront either the government or the landlords or the moneylenders, nor did they attempt forcible seizures of land. In fact, many of these struggles were purely agitational in character and activity was concentrated on enlistment of members, founding of Kisan Sabhas, holding provincial conferences and

[11] This is clearly borne out even by Sunil Sen's account of the Tebhaga Struggle in Bengal, which perhaps saw a larger number of violent clashes between police and peasants than any other contemporary peasant movement in British India. Sunil Sen repeatedly shows how the few incidents of peasant violence were responses to extreme police repression; they were confined mainly to the tribals, and, moreover, when the leadership was squarely faced with the question of resisting the police with arms, it decided against such a course because "the general consensus of opinion among kisan leaders is that armed struggle was not feasible in the prevailing situation". Sen, *Agrarian Struggles in Bengal: 1946–47*, New Delhi, 1972, see especially p. 90.

[12] We are refraining from giving the example of the Quit India Movement of 1942 launched by the Congress in which the scale of violence was higher than in any of the Communist-led movements in British India because it is often argued that this became possible only because the "official" Congress leadership was safely in jail.

meetings at the district, *taluqa* and village levels, organizing kisan marches, mass demonstrations and rallies and the like. And when they resorted to more "direct action", the "action" was very similar to the one adopted by the avowedly non-violent, "élite" or "bourgeois" national movement: refusal to pay government taxes, whether land revenue or water-rates or local rates or *chowkidara* tax, or refusal to pay extra or illegal cesses or more than one-half or one-third of produce to landlords, or mass courting of arrest and picketing.

The fact that peasant movements even under left, mainly Communist, leadership tended, in British India, to adopt largely non-violent forms of struggle is no proof of the reformist or non-revolutionary character either of the left leadership or of these movements. It was the nature of the semi-hegemonic structure of the British Indian state that organically influenced and even determined the choice of forms of struggle. Further, peasants and their leaders in British India had enough experience of the armed power of the British Indian state; their earlier, violent, nineteenth-century revolts, including the massive revolt of 1857, had been successfully crushed by the armed might of the British and they knew therefore the high costs that would have to be paid if a peasantry armed with *lathis,* axes, bows, arrows and spears challenged the modern weaponry of the British empire.[13] Therefore, as in the case of the national movement,[14] both the availability of political space within the semi-hegemonic political structure as well as expediency and calculation of costs organically propelled the peasant movement towards use of non-violent or non-insurrectionary forms of resistance and struggle.

Our argument is strengthened by the experience of peasant struggles in some of the princely Indian states, which had non-hegemonic or fully autocratic or authoritarian political structures, and were also characterized by a weak and inefficient administration and a poor law and order machinery. In two of these states, in the Telengana region of Hyderabad on a big scale and in Patiala on a much smaller scale, peasant movements that were organized under Communist leadership did adopt coercive and violent forms of struggle. It is pertinent, however, that in both these movements, the resort to violence by the people was in response to the first use of force—and too often outside the framework of the law—by the state and the landlords. In Patiala, the armed squad was formed only at a fairly advanced stage of the movement in 1947 when the landlords began to use armed hoodlums to attack the peasants and the state resorted to forcible division

[13] For those unfamiliar with British colonial policies in India, it needs to be pointed out that under British Indian laws, it was illegal for citizens to possess arms without licence and the Indian people had been successfully disarmed in the nineteenth century.

[14] As is well-known, Gandhi repeatedly made it clear that while for him non-violence may be an article of personal faith, for the movement he urged it on the grounds of practical necessity as well.

of land between tenants and landlords. Even then, the armed squad was primarily meant for the protection of the peasants against attacks by the landlords' hoodlums and it generally avoided a direct confrontation with the armed forces of the state (see Chapter 7). In Telengana, too, it was the landlords' attempts to use armed hoodlums to break peasant resistance and later the Nizam's use of razakars, who were a fanatic, communal and extra-legal militia, to supplement his meagre and inefficient armed forces that forced as well as enabled the peasants and their Communist leaders to organize armed squads or *dalams* to protect themselves and the gains of their struggle from attack.[15] I have deliberately refrained from including the example of Punnapra-Vayalar in Travancore State since it was not strictly-speaking a peasant movement—otherwise the similarities with Patiala and Telengana are striking enough, despite the differences.[16]

The same contrast that we see at the national level comes into sharper focus if we direct the spotlight to the peasant movements that emerged in the areas of Punjab ruled by the British and in Patiala, the largest princely state of the region. In the British-ruled part, at no stage did peasant protest take on a violent character. This was as true of the movements based primarily on self-cultivating peasant proprietors around the demands of reduction of land revenue and water rates, abolition of *malba* and *chowkidara* tax, against new revenue settlements that threatened to raise rates of revenue, against re-modelling of canal outlets, as it was of movements of tenants or sharecroppers for limitation on rent and cesses and against evictions. Nor did peasant participation in the major nationalist struggles such as the Civil Disobedience Movement, 1930–34, tend to move in a violent direction. Even in the Quit India Movement of 1942, when peasants in many parts of the country took to violent forms of protest, in Punjab, as seen in Chapter 6, there was very little violence.[17]

[15] Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle*, pp. 28–55.

[16] See, for example, K.C. George, *Immortal Punnapra Vayalar*, New Delhi, 1975 and Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 441–42.

[17] Even if there had been violence in 1942, as there was in many parts of the country, it would not disprove the argument being made here. The Quit India Movement was the only major mass campaign during the Gandhi era that took place when the colonial state in India had, in a sense, "suspended" or deviated from its hegemonic character. The outbreak of the Second World War had provided the occasion for the imposition of the Defence of India Rules under which civil liberties were suspended and freedom of the press curtailed; "normal" political activity such as the holding of meetings, the organisation of demonstrations, made impossible, and the use of *satyagraha* or civil disobedience made extremely difficult. As a consequence, the crossing of the *lakshmanrekha* or boundary line of non-violence not only became legitimate in the eyes of civil society but it often came to be seen, including by many Gandhians, as the only viable way of telling the rulers that the Indian nationalist voice could not be silenced. Quit India, then, confirms rather than questions the general proposition about the relationship between the character of the state and the forms of protest.

It is indeed remarkable that the province that allegedly provided the main sustenance to the favourite British theory of the "martial races", in fact demonstrated very little violence in any of its *mass* anti-British struggles. The use of violence as a primary political weapon remained confined to those struggles that themselves remained confined to small groups. For example, the Kuka Movement in the nineteenth century was the handiwork of a small band of men and even in that the violence was used more by the British than by the Kukas. Similarly, the Babbar Akalis in the early 1920s were another such militant group whose members may have got a lot of sympathy and support from the peasants but whose methods were not adopted by them. The methods that found favour were those of the mainstream Akali Movement—non-violent *jathas* and *morchas*—and not of the Babbar Akalis. The Ghadar Movement, too, was a mass movement, to the extent that it was, only among Indians abroad; in Punjab it failed to acquire anything resembling a mass character (see Chapter 1). Bhagat Singh and his revolutionary terrorist comrades also remained in the same tradition, they were admired and mourned with a deep fervour, but they were not followed in their path of violence by the mass of the people, urban or rural. Therefore, it is not even possible to argue that the movements of the peasants of Punjab that remained within non-violent parameters did so because of the lack of any real alternative models of violent protest or due to the absence of organizations or leadership committed to and capable of employing violent forms. Violent alternatives *were* offered and they were not accepted, presumably for good reason.

Even in the years 1937–47 when the peasant movement in most of British Punjab was almost completely under a centralized Communist leadership, with the Punjab Kisan Committee having been formed in 1937 and the District Kisan Committees working under its direction, there was never any attempt by Communists, either of the Kirti or the CPI variety, to adopt a strategy based on violence. The emphasis remained on formation of *Kisan Sabhas*, holding of meetings and conferences, and organization of demonstrations. In the two big *morchas* before the war, in Amritsar in 1938 and Lahore in 1939, and in the Amritsar Mogha Morcha in 1946, the same method of non-violent civil disobedience—courting of arrest by *jathas* or groups of volunteers—was employed that was the stock-in-trade of the national and the Akali Movements (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6). There was not even any movement based on a form of non-violent civil disobedience, such as the non-payment of land revenue, which could invite government action by way of confiscation of lands (as had happened in the Congress-led movements in Bardoli in 1928 and in some districts of Gujarat in 1931–32).

Lest it be urged that the disinclination towards use of violence in the peasant struggles in central Punjab can be explained by their being based largely on peasants who owned at least some land and therefore, like all

property owners, eschew modes of action that can threaten property, let us call as witnesses the property-less tenants-at-will or sharecroppers of Nili Bar, Montgomery and Multan. Their struggles in 1938–39 and in 1946–47, against the lease-holding companies and other big landlords, which were fought around the demand for *adho-adh* or limitation of rent to half the produce and other associated issues, also did not show any propensity towards use of violent forms of resistance. They used the weapons of deputations, meetings, conferences, of strikes and resistance to evictions, courting of arrest and, towards the end of the period under study, even some refusal to pay rent, but remained always within the limits of non-violence.[18]

The only major incident of violence that occurred in the course of this movement was when the police opened fire on a crowd of tenants that was awaiting the arrival of the deputy commissioner on 1 January 1947 at Diluwala. This firing was without any provocation from the tenants and one tenant lost his life in the incident.[19]

It is significant that this was in fact the only time that the police fired on the peasants. In no other *kisan* demonstration or *morcha* in British Punjab in the period of our study do we have any such instance of firing on the crowd. This is not to say that the government was soft on the peasants or their leaders; *lathis* were used freely and viciously to disperse agitators as in the Amritsar Morcha in 1938 and in the Mogha Morcha in 1946; arrests and long periods of detention sometimes accompanied by torture were the rule, especially for the leaders and organizers, and publications such as *Kirti* and pamphlets and posters were regularly proscribed. So it was not that the government was wary of using repression to contain the movement but it could—given its semi-hegemonic character—only use that degree of repression that it could to some extent justify as being necessary. Since the peasants did not ever take recourse to a strategy based on violence, nor could the government afford to adopt methods, such as firing on unarmed and peaceful demonstrators, which would tend to considerably erode its hegemony.

In Patiala, on the other hand,[20] the movement of the *muzaras* for restoration of proprietary rights went on a path quite different from the one taken by the movement in the British areas, despite being conducted under the direction of the same Punjab Kisan Committee. Beginning with deputations and formation of *Kisan Sabhas*, it rapidly developed the methods of non-payment of rent, resistance to evictions and later the formation of an armed wing, however small, to protect itself. Its course was marked by any number of physical clashes with the *biswedars*' retainers and even the forces

[18] See Chapters 5 and 6.
[19] See Chapter 6.
[20] See Chapter 7.

of the state. In other words, its methods were not primarily agitational but involved an open confrontation with the *biswedars* and the state, with recourse to violence when necessary.

The considerable success that attended the *muzaras'* struggle, demonstrating the effectiveness and viability of its forms of protest, stood in marked contrast to the inability of the movement of the self-cultivating peasants of Patiala to make much of an impact either among the peasants themselves or on the state. This movement, again led mainly by the Communists, employed methods that had been used with considerable effect in the neighbouring British districts, for achieving objectives, such as the reduction of land revenue, which were similar to those desired by the Patiala *kisans*. Nor was there any other marked difference between the peasants of Patiala and the peasants of central Punjab. They shared a common religious and caste identity, being mainly Jat Sikhs, and also a common political experience, since the Akali Movement that gripped central Punjab in the early 1920s had a powerful impact on and significant participation from the Patiala peasants.[21] One is forced, therefore, to locate the difference in impact to the fact that the autocratic and non-hegemonic state structure of Patiala was not sensitive to the more subtle forms of pressure that worked in British Punjab. Itself used to the open display and use of force, it could only comprehend its opponents when they used the language of coercion.

It may well be argued that it would not be correct to attribute the difference in intensity and success between the two movements in Patiala, that is, of the peasant proprietors and tenants, to differences in methods and forms of struggle alone, for admittedly there may well be a difference between the extent to which a landowning peasant would be willing to go in pursuance of his demands for reduction of land revenue, etc., which for him were not in the nature of a life and death struggle, and the readiness of the *muzaras*, filled with a deep sense of wrong at having been deprived, within living memory, of hereditary rights, to fight and make sacrifices for regaining their lost status. Our argument can perhaps be better sustained by a comparison with a movement of those tenants in British Punjab who had exactly the same demands and the same feeling of having been deprived of their hereditary proprietary rights as the Patiala tenants. This was the movement of the tenants of Una Tehsil in Hoshiarpur District which had in fact begun much earlier, in the 1920s, and continued well into the 1940s. The tenants of Una refused to recognize the proprietary rights that the British tenurial arrangements had vested in the landlords and continued to assert their claims to the land and, sporadically at least, refused payment of *batai*. However, at no point did this movement, though it too

[21] See Mohinder Singh, *The Akali Movement in Punjab*, for an account of participation by Patiala peasants in the Akali *jathas*. Also interview with Jagir Singh Joga.

was led, in its later phase, by Communists, who were, along with the Patiala Communists, working under the direction of the Punjab Kisan Committee, in spite of its longer history as an organized movement, tend to adopt the path of struggle seen in the *Muzara* Movement in Patiala, characterized by forcible occupation of land and resistance to evictions by force, often leading to violent clashes, the formation of an armed wing, and the like.[22]

Our conclusion from this discussion is that the variation in the pattern of activity and methods of struggle assumed by different peasant movements in British Punjab and in the princely state of Patiala stemmed in large part from the basic difference between the nature and strength of the two *political* structures, in that the former being semi-hegemonic in character, was susceptible to pressure of a kind very different from the one that was needed to have an impact on the latter, which was autocratic in character, and, second, the former was far better structured in terms of administrative and law and order machinery. The British colonial state in India had therefore very little trouble in suppressing violent activity of any kind, at least it did so without tremendous political cost, given the semi-hegemonic foundations of British rule in India—a rule that was buttressed by the ideology of Pax Britannica, law and order, the British official as the *mai-bap* of the people, as well as by the institutions of the educational, legal, judicial, constitutional and administrative systems which acted as the active purveyors of these colonial ideologies—and given the efficiency of its machinery of administration and control and suppression. It is not, therefore, unreasonable to presume that had any attempts been made by the Communists in British Punjab, as elsewhere in the country, to use violent methods of struggle in the peasant movements they led, either against the landlords or against the government, as was done by the Communists in Patiala, such attempts could have been crushed and countered with relative political ease by the government and, more important, they would not have shaken the hegemonic foundations of that rule in the manner in which the actual Communist-led movements which assumed "legitimate", that is, legal, constitutional as well as non-constitutional but peaceful forms of struggle were able to do. Conversely, in the autocratic but administratively

[22] For a detailed account of the Una tenants' struggle see Chhajju Mal Vaid, "Tenant Movement", in Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, pp. 263–71. Also interviews with Thakur Gopal Singh, Master Hari Singh, Harkishen Singh Surjeet, Chhajju Mal Vaid, Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri and others. I have omitted a detailed consideration of this movement from the present study for the following reasons. First, I could not get enough information about it from government records or newspapers. Second, I could only meet one leader who was actually involved in the movement at the local level, Thakur Gopal Singh, though many others mentioned here talked about the movement with considerable knowledge. Third, Chhajju Mal Vaid, cited here, has already presented an exhaustive account of the movement based on personal accounts and other material not available to me and I found that my account would be much poorer than his.

weaker set-ups, such as in Patiala, the success of the movements in shaking the foundations of princely rule was precisely dependent on their ability to adopt different, even violent, methods of struggle such as the one used with such remarkable success by the *muzaras*.

This also means that methods or forms of struggle are not more or less "revolutionary" simply by virtue of being violent or peaceful, or legal or illegal, or constitutional or non-constitutional. The revolutionariness of any activity or method of struggle, that is, its capacity to undermine the structure it is directed against, is a function of its suitability and viability in any given situation and is not determined necessarily by its "moderate" or "extreme" character. In this context, one can give the example of the *Muzara* Movement which, because it failed to take account of the change in the character of the political structure in Patiala after Independence, from autocratic to increasingly hegemonic, a change of which the new policy of granting full proprietary rights by means of legislation was one example, and continued to follow the same methods of struggle as it had adopted with great success against the old regime, found that these methods were becoming increasingly unviable both vis-à-vis the government as well as vis-à-vis the peasants. The government, once it had offered full proprietary rights through legislation, was unwilling to tolerate any defiance of its legal and administrative authority, and the peasants, once they saw the possibility of getting their demands fulfilled by means of legislative enactments, even though this involved payment of some compensation, that is, in a reformist way, were unwilling to continue with the earlier methods of forcible occupation of land, that is, which often involved them in bloody and violent clashes with landlords and sometimes, through rarely, even with the government forces. The Communist leaders of the movement, however, failed to either anticipate this change in policy or fully comprehend its implications once it was under way and thus allowed themselves to be overtaken by events and gradually but surely isolated themselves from the peasants for whom they had fought so long and so hard. They were unable to evolve, for the Patiala peasants, new methods of struggle, new slogans and may be even new demands (once their demand for proprietary rights was conceded) which were suited to the changed situation (see Chapter 7.)

The difference between hegemonic or semi-hegemonic and autocratic or authoritarian political structures had another important implication as well, which can again be illustrated by means of a comparison between British Punjab and Patiala. Since the latter, that is, non-hegemonic, type of structure provided very little political space for constitutional and legal oppositional political activity, those political groups (such as the Akalis in Patiala) whose ideology or class or political interests did not permit them to adopt illegal or non-constitutional forms of political action, which were

the only viable ones in the given situation, found themselves increasingly isolated from the popular movements and, as a consequence, became politically irrelevant or even loyalist and collaborationist. This, in turn, facilitated the establishment of the political hegemony over the movement of those groups which did not have any ideological or other reasons for eschewing non-constitutional, illegal and even violent forms of political actions (and in Patiala these were primarily the Communists and radical Praja Mandalists).[23] Thus, in non-hegemonic structures, radical, especially Communist, groups tend to have an inbuilt political advantage over the more moderate, constitutionalist political groups, or at least they face very little political competition from the latter. In hegemonic or semi-hegemonic political set-ups, however, the situation is far more complex, for the political space provided for legal, constitutional oppositional activity is much greater. This means that even legal and constitutional methods of struggle have a certain validity and viability in terms of the pressure that can be exerted through these methods on the state for the extraction of economic and political concessions. Furthermore, the hegemonic or semi-hegemonic state, for the purpose of maintaining its hegemonic influence, is also forced and willing to grant some amount of concessions and would give, or at least want to appear to give, these concessions as a response to constitutional and legal oppositional activity (as, for example, when the Punjab government granted land revenue remissions in the 1930s, the Unionists were able to project this as their achievement, though, in fact, the agitation of the *Kisan Sabhas* in which other political groups had also been very active, had probably been much more instrumental in achieving this concession). Consequently, radicals and Communists do not have the advantage of lack of effective political competition from moderate, constitutionalist groups, for these latter groups, too, could be oppositional as well as remain within legal and constitutional limits, at least till pressures from below forced them to make different choices, and they could therefore offer to the radical groups a more serious and often successful challenge.[24] This also

[23] Jagir Singh Joga notes that, in Patiala, they never had much of a struggle for control over the Praja Mandal, as the right-wing group was very weak and the combined strength of the Communists and non-Communist left was much greater. This was different, he says, from British Punjab, where there was a continuous struggle for influence over the Congress between the right-wing and left-wing groups (Interview).

[24] Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri recounts that when the Communist influence began to spread among the Sikh peasantry in British Punjab, the Akalis were perturbed and launched a propaganda campaign against the Communists, which the latter too countered with their own propaganda. However, he notes, "*our task became easier once the Akalis became pro-imperialist, before that it was difficult*" (interview). In other words, so long as Akalis continued to be oppositional and were not clearly pro-imperialist or loyalist, the Communists had serious difficulties in countering their influence, even though they were not launching any militant or non-constitutional struggles.

helps to explain why Communists and radicals in Patiala were so rapidly able to establish their hegemony over the *Muzara* Movement (as they were the only ones willing to adopt the forms of political action that were required) and also why the same groups in British Punjab never had the kind of monopoly of political influence on the peasantry that was enjoyed by the Communists and other radicals in Patiala.[25]

The focus on forms of struggle as determinants of the revolutionary and "subaltern" or non-revolutionary and "élite" nature of struggle is misleading also because it diverts attention from a discussion of the actual determinants of revolutionariness. The revolutionary nature of any particular movement flows not from its forms of struggle, or methods of mobilization, but from the nature of the primary contradiction that is sought to be resolved, its social and political objectives, its ability to mobilize and politicize wide sections of the masses, its capacity to challenge the existing order and pose the question of structural change, its long-term impact on areas and social classes not directly involved in the struggle, on society as a whole and on the relationships of power and exploitation.[26] It is to these "aspects" of movements that we must turn if we want to assess their revolutionary character. It is these features that have to be examined when different movements are compared with each other and an assessment offered as to which ones were more "revolutionary" or "radical" than others. If we make comparisons on the basis of forms of struggle or methods of mobilization, we are likely to end up with fairly wrong and even ludicrous conclusions.

I give a few examples here to substantiate the argument. If we take use of violence or violent forms of struggle as the determinant of revolutionariness, we would be forced to characterize Sita Ram Raju's tribal revolt of 1922–24 as more revolutionary or radical than the Kisan Sabha Movement in coastal Andhra which organized wide sections of peasants, including tenants and agricultural labourers. We would also be forced to characterize the Mappila Rebellion of 1921 as more revolutionary than the Tebhaga struggle in Bengal since the latter movement only sporadically used violence whereas the Mappilas organized a full-scale rebellion. Of course, the Bardoli Movement of 1928 which demonstrated heroic non-violent

[25] Karam Singh Mann very perceptively pointed out that Communism has come only in countries which have never known democracy. And conversely, wherever the British have ruled, Communists have not been able to succeed. In fact, without using the terms hegemonic and non-hegemonic, he said exactly what is being argued here (interview).

[26] Struggles which are marked by temporary inversions of the symbols of domination, which turn the "world upside down" for some time, are not necessarily revolutionary in terms of their long-term impact on the relationships of power and domination, though they undoubtedly help to keep alive the tradition of resistance. Ranajit Guha, for example, fails to see this aspect of the character of nineteenth century revolts. See Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*. Skocpol, on the other hand, distinguishes sharply between even successful rebellions and social revolutions. See Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions*, p. 4.

resistance, electrified the entire country and inspired the peasants all over the country during the next decade would of necessity occupy a place pretty low down on the revolutionary scale.

We would also then classify the Kisan Sabha Movement in Bihar under Swami Sahajanand's leadership as more radical than the Communist-led Kisan Sabha Movements in Malabar or Punjab because Swamiji asked the Bihar peasants to adopt the *lathi* or stick as their symbol and carry it to meetings whereas his Punjab and Malabar comrades did not ask their peasants to do so, despite the fact that their influence in their own areas was no less than that of Swamiji in Bihar. And without doubt, the Revolt of 1857, organized primarily under traditional leadership and with traditional ideologies, would have to be more revolutionary in its aims than the non-violent national movement led by Gandhiji and the Congress.

Within Punjab, if we followed the same logic, we would inevitably place the Patiala *muzaras'* struggle at the top of the revolutionary hierarchy. In reality, however, the political consciousness of the peasants of central Punjab, especially of the districts of Jullundur, Amritsar, Lyallpur, Lahore and Hoshiarpur, who had participated in the peasant as well as national struggles, was far more advanced, in its democratic, anti-imperialist and anti-communal aspects, than that of the Patiala tenants, or even of the tenants in the canal colonies. Greater or lesser "militancy", whether inclusive of violence or otherwise, is a function not of greater or lesser radicalism or revolutionariness, but of the context in which it occurs. As argued in Chapter 5, the extent and depth of politicization was as great among the peasants of the district of Jullundur as it was in Amritsar, and certainly more than it was in Lahore, but circumstances prevented this from being expressed in a *morcha* or big "struggle". In Patiala, on the other hand, as I argue later, anti-imperialist and even perhaps anti-feudal and anti-communal consciousness remained much weaker.

Thus, violence becomes a revolutionary necessity not in all situations, but in those where the nature of the state is not primarily hegemonic, but is based primarily on naked force, and is autocratic or repressive. Further, it becomes possible or becomes a viable method of struggle when the administrative and law and order machinery is weak or disorganized or in crisis or overburdened. Where the character of the state is hegemonic or semi-hegemonic, as in British India, the struggle against the state is also primarily a hegemonic one and hegemonic struggles are usually characterized by peaceful mass movements and ideological-political struggle, rather than by violent rebellion or insurrectionary seizure of power. In such situations, non-violence does not *per se* become non-revolutionary, but may be an essential part of a revolutionary strategy of hegemonic struggle for the transformation of society. Forms of struggle that are based on or include violence may be able to perform a revolutionary role in one

situation, that is, they may be able to express the peoples' urges and thus mobilize people, put effective pressure on the opponent, erode or even destroy his authority, but the same forms may be totally unsuitable in another political context and may even perform an objectively counter-revolutionary role by exposing the movement prematurely to repression and demoralizing the participants. In this latter context, forms of struggle that are non-violent in nature may be more effective in their capacity to mobilize people and exert pressure on the authorities.

That this was indeed so, that non-violence enabled a degree of active mass participation in political activity by all varieties of people—especially those who usually remained confined in a predominantly violent struggle to the ranks of "sympathizers" or silent supporters or at best covert supporters, that is, they might give financial support, or hide the activists or guerillas and give them food and shelter—has been already argued and demonstrated for the Indian national movement as a whole.[27] This was, however, equally true for peasant struggles in British India, which operated with imperatives broadly similar to that of the national movement. Non-violent forms, for which the space was in turn created by the hegemonic, that is, primarily ideological nature of the struggle, provided far greater space for mass participation than was ever possible in a violent struggle. Besides, as noted in the second section of Chapter 8, non-violence makes mass participation into an imperative of the struggle, for non-violent forms cannot be effective without their large-scale adoption. Thus, non-violence simultaneously enabled as well as necessitated the mass character of the movement of which it was a part. For example, while many thousands could go to attend a public meeting and thus signal their participation in and support to the movement, a public meeting that did not attract large numbers automatically failed in its purpose, which was to demonstrate strength through public display of numerical support. Just as an election in which a small percentage turn up to vote delegitimizes the very democratic process that it is meant to uphold and can only lend legitimacy to those who win it if it is a real contest in which the people have participated in sufficiently large numbers.

Those who worked among the peasants, even when they were Communists who were reared on the notions of democracy being a "bourgeois" ideology and non-violence a ruse of the same bourgeoisie or "vested interests" or at best a "Gandhian fad", in practice functioned very effectively within the boundaries of non-violence. And some of them were even quite conscious, or at least became conscious, that non-violence itself had enabled a certain kind of mass participation that was not possible otherwise.

[27] See Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, especially pp. 46–53 and Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, especially Chapter 38.

Sohan Singh Narangabadi,[28] for example, who was an activist in the Tarn Taran area of Amritsar, was quite categorical in his view that "the circumstances of that time did not demand an armed struggle. The need was for participation by all sections, middling, rich and poor, industrialists and merchants. All these sections could not participate in that kind of armed struggle. That is why this kind of struggle—non-violent—was thought to be better and more suitable. Non-violent struggle pulls in different sections of people. Because some people join on their own, others will join after some hesitation or after a halt. You have to retreat in order to bring those who are behind along with you. Then all sections will fight together. When they all struggled, only then the British left. If some people had got left behind or gone over to the other side, then we could not have been successful. Non-violent struggle keeps pulling everyone along, even those who walk only a little part of the way". He rejected the view that non-violence favoured the propertied and that armed struggle is inherently more suited to the poor. "Objective circumstances also vary from country to country. And it is also a question of which leadership has established itself. In Vietnam, in China, a different [kind of] leadership had established itself—here we could not do that".

Narain Singh Shahbazpuri[29] said very frankly: "At that time we thought Gandhiji's non-violent policy was wrong, and that the British will have to be pushed out with force. Now I think he was right. One benefit of a non-violent policy was the opportunity to go to the people and explain [the issues] to them. The other was the protective cover it provided." He gives the example of Dr Kitchlew, the Congress leader from Amritsar, making a fiery speech in which he said that they would answer bombs with bombs and bullets with bullets, but had so far been restrained because of Gandhiji. "So you could arouse the people and have the protective cover of Gandhiji".

One is reminded here of Bipan Chandra's insightful observation that for a disarmed people, such as the Indians under colonial rule, "non-violence is also a way of becoming equal in political resources to an armed state in a war of position",[30] that is, in a hegemonic struggle. Also, Kitchlew knew very well that he could not answer bullets with bullets, but it gave his audience greater self-confidence when they heard him say that Indians were not resorting to violence because of Gandhiji's non-violence policy, that is, as a matter of choice and not out of a necessity dictated by their disarmed status. In politics, making virtues out of necessities is not an admission of weakness, it is political wisdom—without which the political strategies

[28] The account in this paragraph is based on his interview.
[29] The account in this paragraph is based on his interview.
[30] Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, p. 49.

cannot succeed. As Karl Marx once said, "freedom is the recognition of necessity". Only when the necessity of non-violence was recognized and it was raised to the level of a choice freely made, could its tremendous potential be realized.

Jagbir Singh Chhina,[31] too, emphasized the ability of non-violent struggle to include all kinds of people in its fold and its utility in warding off repression. Joginder Singh Chhina pointed out that all groups adopted Gandhiji's non-violent policy and all movements were non-violent. Karam Singh Mann, too, readily acknowledged the contribution of Gandhiji's policy of non-violence. "Earlier we used to call him a British agent, agent of the bourgeoisie, etc., but now there is a reassessment. About his non-violence also, it is a great contribution, the whole world recognizes it, it removed a mighty power. Our Akali Movement was also non-violent, it succeeded in making the British set up the Shiromani Sabha [Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee or SGPC]."

This discussion of violent versus non-violent forms of struggle was conducted in the hope that it would help settle some of the dust raised by the "violent" debates it has aroused in the past. In the belief that this has indeed been accomplished and greater clarity and not more dust has ensued, we now shift our focus onto other, equally important aspects of the forms of struggle and mobilization which constitute the dynamics of peasant politics.

Forms of Struggle and Methods of Mobilization[32]

Peasant protest had, like the national movement, an open, non-violent, mass character and the forms of protest and mobilization it employed were in consonance with this character. It was not based either on an underground network of organization, or on jacqueries or guerilla struggle, or on secret societies, or on a "Red Army", or on conspiratorial action. Even when the Communist component of its leadership was operating under a ban, as it was between 1934 and 1942, in the movement it functioned openly, as a part of the Congress. (see Chapters 4, 5 and 6.) Even during the period from October 1939 to May 1942, when the government had taken an extra-tough line towards the left-wing and arrested many leaders because of the anti-War campaign, only a small section of the leadership went

[31] The account in this paragraph is based on interviews with those mentioned in the text.

[32] The generalizations made in this section are based for the large part on material already presented in Book 1 of this study. I will restrict the references therefore to specific examples or fresh evidence.

underground[33]—the remaining activists continued to lead and organize essentially open mass activity, to the extent possible. (see Chapter 6.)

This open mass character of the movement found reflection all the way down the line. Mobilization of peasants, even at the village level, was accomplished not through secret conclaves in peasant homes in the dead of the night, but essentially through public meetings called under the tree in the village *chaupal* or in the local *gurdwara*, often by sending a little child around with a bell or a drum to rally the villagers. A table and a couple of chairs, if they were available, completed the rest of the formalities. If the activists were on a tour for enlisting members for the Kisan Sabha or the Congress, or usually for both, forms were handed around and the one *anna* and four *anna* membership fees collected on the spot. If the visit of the activists was a prelude to a bigger conference in the neighbourhood or even in a neighbouring district, the appeal would be for people to attend in large numbers and contribute grain and money for the *langar* or communal kitchen. Village-level activists would later turn this appeal into fact by collecting the grain from each house and delivering it to the site of the conference.

The preparation for a big *morcha* or struggle involved a slight variation of this pattern. Along with the conferences and meetings held to explain the issues of struggle and rally support, the activists or cadre would also invite and prepare volunteers for participation in specific activities such as the sending of a *jatha* to court arrest. The cadre would ensure that the necessary number of people required to make up a *jatha* reached the right place at the right time. They would also ensure that replacements, when necessary, were available—as when the police arrested members of a *jatha* before they could reach their destination in the town or the city where the demonstration had to be held. The only secrecy involved in this form of activity was that the names of members of *jathas* would sometimes have to be kept secret so that they were not arrested before they could make a public appearance, or members would not appear together but come separately or in secret to the spot where they would want to offer arrest.[34] Again, the "secrecy", or rather the game of hide and seek with the police, was no greater than that employed by non-Communist Congress *satyagrahis* in their civil disobedience campaigns, or by Communists and Congressmen in the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement.[35] Similarly, as with the Akali *jathas* of the early 1920s and the nationalist *jathas* in the Civil Disobedience Movement, villages *en route* not only organized rousing welcomes for the

[33] Harkishen Singh Surjeet was one of the few who were underground. Interview with Surjeet.
[34] This was done particularly in the Lahore Kisan Morcha when the police started arresting the *jathas* as soon as they appeared in their home districts (see Chapter 5, Section VI).
[35] See Chapter 6, Section I, especially footnote 30, for the Communists' interpretation of the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement in Punjab.

jathas as they passed through but also took on the entire burden of providing food and shelter for their members. Thus, for example, a *jatha* that was going from a village in Jullundur District to participate in the Lahore Kisan Morcha in 1939 was not only a symbol of participation by the village or villages from which it was constituted but also became the vehicle for mobilization of and participation in by all the villages through which it journeyed.

It is perhaps worth emphasizing that the role of big and small conferences, of village and tehsil-level meetings, was, like that of the *jathas*, dual in nature. These gatherings were simultaneously vehicles for mobilization and forums for participation. When peasants gathered under the tree in the village square or trudged many miles to attend a conference addressed by Jawaharlal Nehru or Jay Prakash Narain or Achhar Singh Chhina, they did not only go to hear what their leaders had to say. They also went to express support and make a show of strength. In fact, as was wryly commented by many official observers, the loudspeakers usually failed when big leaders were addressing a crowd of thousands and few could really hear anything at all. But what the official observers did not understand was that this did not mean that the peasants had come only to see a *tamasha*.[36] They had come primarily to vote with their feet—their local leaders would transmit and explain the message of the big leaders to them at leisure when they went back to their villages.

One also needs to single out another dimension of the role of the larger conferences. Each such conference provided an opportunity to local leaders and cadre to initiate a flurry of activity. A series of small and big meetings in villages would be held to advertise the date, venue and star attractions of the conference, to collect funds and grain, and explain the reasons why the conference was being held. Activists would tour the rural area in groups, consolidating their hold on already existing strongholds and trying to use the occasion to gain an entry into unfamiliar terrain. The same process was repeated after the conference. Local leaders would go around thanking people for their participation, explaining the new ideas that might have been heard at the big conference or using the authority of the big national-level leaders to legitimize among the peasants ideas they already held.[37] For example, once Jawaharlal Nehru came in 1936 to Punjab and talked of

[36] I have demonstrated this at length in the context of Jawaharlal Nehru's tour of Punjab in 1936 in Chapter 4, Section IV.

[37] Gyanendra Pandey has also pointed out that "the special significance of the mass meeting as an instrument of mobilization was noted by Jawaharlal Nehru". Referring to a Kisan Conference held at Allahabad for the launching of the no-tax campaign in October, 1930, he wrote: "Delegates had come to it from practically every important village in the district and, when they dispersed, they carried the news of the fresh decisions affecting the peasantry, of my arrest in connection with them, to every part of the district. They became, sixteen hundred of them, effective and enthusiastic propagandists for the "no-tax campaign'." Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 82–84.

socialism, local-level left-wing activists began to openly propagate the ideology by quoting the Congress president. (see Chapter 4, Section IV.) Big conferences, thus, provided opportunities akin to those that are created by an election—the political atmosphere gets surcharged, people get energized and become open to political mobilization and organization, and activists find a ready reason for reaching out to people and taking new ideas to them. However, unlike in an election, when you cast your ballot in the ballot-box, in this case, as said earlier, you voted with your feet. Further, big conferences served as a show of strength not only to the authorities but also to the sceptics, the waverers and the half-converted among the peasants themselves. The presence of big leaders and of large numbers reassured the ordinary peasants that they would not be abandoning the safety of the *status quo* for the wilderness. Any movement needs to demonstrate a certain degree of success and support before the mass of the people are willing to move towards it. Success, in turn, breeds success.

It can be said that public meetings, small, big and mammoth, and *jathas*, in that order, were the most important forms of mobilization and participation in peasant politics in Punjab, as they were in peasant and other mass movements that sprouted across the country in the Gandhian era. I place public meetings before even *jathas* because they were more pervasive; they were, to stretch a phrase, more "everyday forms" of politics. *Jathas* appeared as part of *morchas* or big struggles, which were necessarily less frequent than the round-the-year political activity that was carried on via public meetings. Besides, anyone could participate in a public meeting, whereas only those capable of and willing to pay the cost of getting arrested and spending time in jail or getting beaten up by police *lathis* could participate in a *jatha*. Meetings thus provided for the widest possibilities for mobilization and participation: they were the staple on which the movement was based.

Peasant activists of all levels have supplied graphic examples of the forms of participation and methods of mobilization. A few of these are cited here as illustrations to convey their own distinctive flavour.[38] I begin with Ujagar Singh Bilga, who, amongst our live witnesses, had the longest experience of grassroots-level organization. He described at great length, how, when he first went around organizing the *karza* committees (in 1935), which were the earlier form of the *Kisan Sabhas*, he would go to a village, discuss the problems of debt faced by all sections of the village, including the Harijans, and then discuss how they could solve these problems. He would then organize meetings in the villages, first small meetings in small villages, then big meetings in the bigger villages, to which peasants would come from the surrounding areas. He also described how they organized big

[38] All the examples given here are based on interviews.

conferences, travelling to distant parts of the country to invite the national leaders, collecting grain in huge quantities, etc. During the Civil Disobedience Movement, in his village Bilga, he organized a *salt satyagraha*, making salt from *kallar* or saline soil. The *satyagraha* lasted two months even after his arrest, he said, and every fourth day a *jatha* of 25 would go and make salt in defiance of the law, in strict accordance with the line of command and the sequence that he had laid down before his arrest. As is evident, his account is replete with references to meetings, *jathas*, *satyagrahas*, conferences, *sabhas* or committees, which were all the staple fare popularized by the national movement.

Karam Singh Mann described vividly how a meeting was organized in a village. "Youngsters would announce the meeting—there were no loudspeakers available then. People would get together and we would say: select a *pradhan*, a president. A local man would usually be honoured by being made the president. The stage secretary was our man [an activist] and he directed the proceedings". He also says that in the backward areas, people would often ask, how can we have a government without a king. Then the ideas of democracy, of a republic would be explained. Describing how *karza committees* were formed, he says they extensively used pamphlets, replete with statistics often supplied by Brij Narain, for their propaganda. People also contributed freely for the *langar*, in accordance with Sikh tradition.

Jagbir Singh Chhina talked about activists going on their bicycles to villages, bringing out pamphlets, getting people together for a *morcha*, as in the case of the Harsa Chhina Morcha in 1946 in his village, when political workers were assigned duties to gather a specific number of volunteers to make up the *jatha* on any particular day. Joginder Singh Chhina also described how they mobilized people in the village through discussions, pamphlets, meetings and via the contacts they had with Congressmen who belonged to the villages. Balwant Singh Azad, a local-level activist, mentioned meetings and *jathas* as the two forms of participation and mobilization.

Ram Singh Majitha, a middle-level activist, detailed the process of mobilization at the level of the village. Activists would go to a village, call people together in the *gurdwara* or some other common place, and talk to them. Or they would go to the villages on occasions of customary or religious significance, such as *puranmashi* or full moon day, when people had already collected in a common place, put up a stage and talk against the British.

Bhagat Singh Bilga described how trained cadres with a penchant for mass mobilization were sent to the politically-backward areas. Lahori Ram Pardesi, he said, went to Kangra, learnt the local language, composed songs in it and danced to them to attract attention. The activists, he said, totally immersed themselves in the peasants; they wore their dress, slept in their

homes and often in the process contracted untreatable diseases like tuberculosis. At the height of the peasant movement in the United Front phase, he said, (referring most likely to the years 1937–39), they were holding *upto 76 meetings a day in each district*. Interestingly, it is the large number of the meetings that he cites as proof of the strength of the movement. This is also the index used in this study (see Chapter 5) to gauge the strength of the movement in a "non-struggle" area—the district of Jullundur, which, interestingly is Bhagat Singh Bilga's home district.

Master Hari Singh also refers to meetings as the form through which the peasant agitation in Kapurthala for reduction of land revenue was organized. This is interesting because, despite being a princely state, Kapurthala was nowhere near Patiala in the repressive measures used against agitators and therefore open public meetings could become an *effective* form of mobilization, which they could not in Patiala. Ruldu Khan is the only one who said that we first had secret meetings, then open meetings, then big meetings. This is possibly because the tenants-at-will he was organizing in Ferozepore were too afraid initially to come out into the open for fear of repressive measures, such as evictions, etc., by their big landlords, such as the Nawab of Mamdot, who also had considerable political influence because of his Muslim League links.

Harkishen Singh Surjeet described first his experiences as a young boy of fourteen, when his father's old political contacts, belonging to all kinds of political groups, Akalis, Congress, Kirtis, would come to their house in the village (even after his father had gone abroad after giving up politics due to financial constraints). He explained that the house of the "political man" in the village—whether he was a Congressman, Akali or whatever—was used by *all political workers* as the base and the political man—or his family—was the contact person through which the village was mobilized. He describes an occasion in 1930 when his father's associates, Baba Karam Singh Cheema and Bhag Singh, came to his village to hold a meeting under the Kirti Kisan banner, which had by then been declared illegal.

> When I was coming from school, they were already in the home, taking food. They asked me to make arrangements for the meeting. So I took, for [making the] announcement, a *ghanti* [bell] from the Gurdwara and made [an] announcement in the village, brought a stool and a table from the Gurdwara and just under a banyan tree, organised a meeting.... Next day I was called by the Headmaster, asking me to apologize or I will have to quit the school.... So I refused.... I left the school.

Surjeet also had one of the most graphic descriptions of how big conferences were organized and what was their impact. Describing the conferences organized, including the ones attended by Jawaharlal Nehru

in 1936 during his election tours, he said that the preparations began two or three months in advance.

> You see, what we used to do was, you fix up the conference, the locality, district level or local level or at state level. Then on the basis of that formulate some central issues of campaign, form the squads for different areas. You take, for instance, hundred villages.... You form the squad to cover the hundred villages. Then the leading comrades used to go to these villages along with the squad, hold public meetings in those villages and next day appoint somebody, a local leader, to make collections for the [big] conference.... It was the process of two three months which was culminating *in the final rally [which] we used to call "Conference"*. It was [also] the means of collecting finances. There was no other method of collecting finances.... At that time it was in the form of foodgrains.... Some expenditure used to go in the langar because those who came from far away, we would provide food also for them.

He also said:

> In those days people did not require any transport. They used to walk miles together, 30 miles, 40 miles. And that was a period of upsurge. When Nehru is coming...[at] that time people were coming in large numbers from faraway places to see and listen to ... what he says.

Surjeet also gives an idea of the immense mobilizational effort involved. He said that in Jullundur District itself, they had set up organizations in 800 out of the 1200 villages. He also described the *modus operandi* of setting up organizations in the village—both Congress Committees and Kisan Sabhas. He said that first the Congress Committee was organized, in which all, including the shopkeepers, that is, non-peasants, were members. Then a separate meeting of peasants was held, then and there, and a *Kisan Sabha* was formed. The cadres who did the organizing were the same, he said, and therefore it was no problem doing both simultaneously. He himself would on an average tour 10 villages in a day. He would go to a village with his comrades, enrol 10 members himself, entrust the task of enrolment of the rest to the others and move on to the next village. He associates the ease with which this could be done with Nehru's influence: "that time, you see, in 1936, the consciousness was raised very much, it was an upsurge. 1936 was a period when Nehru had come up with a slogan of Socialism."

Significantly, Jwala Singh Barapind's description of how a big conference was organized matched Surjeet's almost to the last dot. Jwala Singh was a local-level activist in the 1930s and he remained at that level even afterwards. He too said that the preparations began two months earlier when he and others would go around the area, telling people why the British had to be

opposed, collecting grain, asking them to come to the conference. He also dates the beginning of the wholesale politicization of his area to the Mazdur Kisan Conference organized in his village, Barapind, in 1937. Describing the mobilization for this conference, he said:

> For two months we prepared for the conference. I was made the Commander—the Commander had to lead the procession on a horse. Bujha Singh was president of the reception committee. First the Communist party people all met and decided to hold a big conference. Then I and Baba Bhag Singh would go around the villages, holding meetings, and talking to the people. We collected a lot of grain from the villages. We had our relatives in the area, and besides we went around and explained to the people how they would benefit from throwing out the British. The British loot our country [we said]. They kill our leaders. They want to keep us as slaves. When they go, we will be able to get all kinds of benefits for ourselves. They, the British, call us coolies. Our brothers who returned from Canada told us that there were boards over there saying "Dogs and Indians not allowed". The people were influenced by all this, and we collected 1800 maunds of grain. We had a *langar* going all the time, which supplied excellent food to all who came.

And where did the funds come from? The most common answer we got to this question from activist-participants was that there was very little need for funds. Most of the activists supported themselves from family sources, only the really needy took a paltry subsistence allowance. And this was as true of Communists as it was of non-Communists. Essentially, the movement supported itself. *Jathas* were fed *en route* by villages. *Langars* at conferences which catered to thousands of people were run by donations of grain made by peasant households. Leaders and cadre on tour would eat and sleep at the homes of local activists. The big leaders would be provided board and lodging, and usually a car, by a local well-to-do family with some nationalist sympathies. Even the horse on which the big leader usually rode at the head of the procession from the local railway station or cross-roads to the venue of the conference was lent by whoever happened to have a good horse. Activists would even manage to save some of the grain and funds collected for conferences to take care of their other expenses like running the office, which too was usually a very simple affair—a room or two in the local town. This office also usually doubled up as a hotel for visiting activists. Elections were also financed in the same way, with collections made in small amounts of 2 or 4 annas.

The *Kirtis* did get some money from Ghadar party sources abroad but this mostly went into the setting up of the *Kirti* press, running of the *Kirti* magazine and other expenses such as long-distance travel, printing of

posters and pamphlets. There is no evidence of any "Russian money", as it was called by the British, being used to finance the movement, either via the *Kirtis* or the CPI group of Communists. Similarly, there is no evidence of Congress party funds from the all-India level being made available to the provincial party. The flow, if any, was in the opposite direction: a share of membership fees had to be sent by the PCC to the AICC.

Thus, political activity among the peasants in Punjab was financed in the same way as anti-imperialist political activity in the rest of the country during the nationalist era: essentially by the people themselves.[39] Financing of political activity—whether through small donations in kind and cash for conferences, or by feeding and housing volunteers and activists, or through the one anna and four anna membership fees and similar donations at times of elections—was also a form of participation. It was in itself a political act. There was, thus, an inverse relationship between the popularity of a movement and the money required from outside for its sustenance. A popular movement could also generate its own resources—it rarely suffered from a shortage of funds. Conversely, a shortage of funds was usually a sign of the weakness of the movement, or of its exhaustion.

Political activists also told in their own inimitable style the story of where funds came from.[40] Harkishen Singh Surjeet first emphasized the fact that political workers were extremely reluctant to take any money for their expenses, even when they needed to, as in the case of his father who had risen to considerable prominence as a nationalist political leader. His father, Harnam Singh, had left the army to join the national movement and had become president of the Akali *jatha*, Jullundur District and the Keshgarh Takhat *gurdwara* had been liberated under his leadership. Meanwhile, Surjeet's grandfather, who was a fairly well-to-do peasant owning 24 acres of land, who had also made money by working in Australia, disinherited his father because of his decision to join nationalist politics and gave him only 2 acres of land for his survival. Having given up his job in the army

[39] This was recognized by the government as well. A report on Congress finances by the director of the Intelligence Bureau, Government of India, in March 1939, concluded that the "Congress has also very important substitutes for regular finance. The "appeal to patriotism" saves a lot of cash expenditures. Free travelling by railway or public motor transport, fees levied on all transactions at markets, voluntary contributions collected at meetings, fairs, etc., by Congress volunteers are examples." The Viceroy, Lord Linlithgow, had also specifically asked "whether Congress can for long continue an existence divorced from the Gandhian moneybags." The answer he got in the same report was the following: "Both for normal Congress activities and for election purposes, the moneybags are less important than the Gandhian superstition (read Gandhian influence) and the powerful influence of Congress ministries in office. With these influences to support them, local Congress organisations can command so much support from the public and also in more or less disguised form, from the official machinery, that they are in a position to fight elections without needing much money." *H.P.* F.4/14-A/1940.

[40] The examples cited here are all from interviews.

and not being able to make ends meet on 2 acres, Harnam Singh, who was unwilling to take any public money for his personal expenses, gave up his political life and, taking great risks, went abroad with an illegal passport to work to sustain his family.

The sacrifice involved in this becomes apparent if we realize that by the time he left he was editor of the *Desh Sewak* and, even more important, secretary of the Desh Bhagat Parivar Sahaik Committee, which was the body through which Ghadar/Kirti funds were channelized into India and the precise purpose of which was to financially help the families of *desh bhagats* or freedom fighters. But instead of accepting public money, he preferred, with the active consent of his wife Gurbachan, to leave the family in virtual penury and go to seek a living in foreign lands. By the time he left, even the 2 acres that his father had given him had been first mortgaged and then sold; Surjeet's mother was reduced to keeping buffaloes and selling milk and spinning in order to make both ends meet.

That Harnam Singh's decision was not a consequence of any weakening of his nationalist political commitment is shown by the fact that, despite travails, he promptly joined the Ghadar/Kirti party in Panama and later the USA. He was also happy that Surjeet had joined politics and in fact wanted him to go to Moscow for training. He had even made all arrangements for this purpose from abroad, but the plan could not come through. He would also write to Surjeet regularly telling him that he could now finance him and on no account should he take public money for his own expenses.

Clearly, the moral code of politics at that time was one that enjoined upon activists that they were only to contribute, to sacrifice and not to take anything or want anything in return from the movement. This obviously went a long way in keeping expenses down and in reducing to a minimum the need for funds. If activists by and large financed themselves and meetings were held in public places, mostly in the open, where was the need for large amounts of money? And if people were willing to sacrifice standing crops on 4 acres of land, which could have easily sustained their families for at least a few months—as was done by Surjeet in 1936 when permission to hold a big public meeting on the village common land was refused by the authorities and he sacrificed his crops to make available the *private* land on which Jawaharlal Nehru's meeting was then held with great success in Surjeet's village, Bundala—then where was the question of paying to hire a venue?

Even for elections to the provincial legislature, says Surjeet, very little money was needed, at least in 1937. In the election of Master Kabul Singh, a Communist who stood on the Congress ticket and in which Surjeet was the campaign manager, and all funds went through his hands, they spent a total of Rs 2,000. And all of it was collected from the people in small amounts

of 2 annas and 4 annas. The same was the case with Sohan Singh Josh's election in 1937, who also stood on a Congress ticket, in which they actually saved Rs 3,000 from what had been collected. There were no large donations from *lalas* or shopkeepers and moneylenders. So the question of their exercising influence on the Congress did not arise. In the cities, he says, some rich people may have spent money from their pockets but this was not so in the rural areas. There was some change, he admits, by the time of the next round of elections in 1945–1946, when more money was spent. But all that went waste, he remarked, since no Communist was elected, as they were "fighting against the current at that time".

Ujagar Singh Bilga also said that people went hungry to attend meetings, political workers sacrificed everything to carry on their work and the situation was very different from the present times, when money is everything. Narain Singh Shahbazpuri also agreed with the general view that expenses were very few and were mainly for running the office. Political workers generally supported themselves, as in his own case, when they could afford it. Only those who were really poor were given some Rs 15–20 per month. Joginder Singh Chhina, who was the office secretary of the Punjab Kisan Sabha in 1944, says that funds were raised from *kisan sabha* membership, from grain that was left over from conferences after a *langar* had been run, at election time as donations, and through mass fund collection drives. Expenses were very few because the needs were also few—very simple food and very simple clothes were the norm.

Even Ruldu Khan, who came from a very poor family, did not rely on party funds for his sustenance. When he started working as a full-time activist, the *kisans* of the village, he said, held a meeting and decided that they would help his family with grain, etc., since Ruldu Khan could no longer earn for them.

If I may add a personal note here. A sense of how movements were financed during the days of the Indian freedom struggle began to dawn on me when I first stepped out of the dark and dingy corridors of the archives into the freshness of the Punjab villages to seek live witnesses of the peasants' struggles. I found very soon that it was difficult to exhaust even the tight budget on which I had embarked on the project. Except for occasions when I was travelling long distance or alone by bus and I paid for my fare, everything else was mysteriously taken care of. Once I landed in Jullundur, or Amritsar, or Kapurthala and established contact with people whose names had been referred to me by their comrades in Delhi, I was virtually looked after. In Jullundur, for example, Sushila Chain and Chain Singh Chain put me up in their own house and personally cooked food for me, Bhagat Singh Bilga's haunt at the Desh Bhagat Memorial Hall and the adjoining CPI(M) office presided over by Satwant Singh, G.S. Randhawa and Dalip Singh Jauhal served as free venues for conducting interviews, not

only of those present there, but of any others they and I could lay hold of. Karam Singh Mann's business office in the city and his house on the outskirts became another camp. Chain Singh Chain personally accompanied me to Moga where a meeting of freedom fighters was taking place. In Phillaur, Ujagar Singh Bilga and his family offered generous hospitality and another venue for conducting interviews. Jwala Singh Barapind gave me one of the best meals in his little shack in a field on the outskirts of the village where he lived. Jagir Singh Joga and his family hosted me and my husband Aditya in their village house for two whole days.

This pattern was repeated *ad infinitum* when a group of us from the Jawaharlal Nehru University (JNU) with Professor Bipan Chandra in the lead began travelling to many different parts of the country, including Punjab, to collect the oral testimonies of participants and observers of the freedom struggle. People we had never seen or heard of before became our travelling companions and unpaid interpreters in areas where we knew neither the terrain nor the local language; we were repeatedly the beneficiaries of free board and lodging in villages and small towns where otherwise we could not even venture because there were no hotels; the families of freedom fighters uncomplainingly provided meals, snacks, tea and coffee when we invaded their homes.

With this experience under our belt, we could begin to understand the expression of amusement and bewilderment that came upon the faces of our witnesses when we popped the question: "how did you fund yourself?" If we, who were only researching the freedom struggle, could survive on so little because we were looked after so well by people we had never known before, then surely we could accept that the freedom fighters, whom the people loved and admired as the very best of their own kind, could manage on even less. If we could still feel the warmth and see the glow of the freedom struggle so long after it was over, then it was not difficult to imagine how those who partook of it were enveloped in its enervating warmth.

And what were the means of communication of ideas and information? Given the largely illiterate peasantry, the emphasis was inevitably on oral and sometimes visual means of communication—speeches, discussions, songs and, in the later years, dramatic performances.[41] Nevertheless, the written word too was important—especially for transmitting information and ideas to the activists. In this, the newspapers, such as *The Tribune* in English and many others in Urdu and Punjabi and journals or magazines like the *Kirti* played a major role. Newspapers carried extensive reports of meetings and conferences held all over the province. They covered the tours

[41] Many activists mentioned the popularity of dramatic performances and songs and the like among the peasants. These forms were used particularly in the Peoples' War phase when students from the cities who constituted the bulk of these "cultural squads" came to the villages collecting funds for the Bengal famine and the like.

of the leaders and activists and announced dates and venues of forthcoming conferences. They also regularly carried articles by specialists such as Brij Narain on issues that were important to the peasants. (see Chapter 4, Section I.) They carried reports of enquiry committees appointed to go into the heavy burden of taxation or the extent of police atrocities. (see Chapter 3.) They wrote editorials supporting the struggles and demanding concessions from the government. In short, they functioned virtually as organs of the movement. This was, it must be emphasized, not only confined to peasant activity during periods of the big nation-wide anti-British struggles or the major peasant *morchas* but applied equally to coverage of the more humdrum peasant political activity that continued relentlessly in non-struggle phases.[42]

Journals or magazines like the *Kirti* performed a different role. The *Kirti* concentrated more on ideological issues, discussing issues relating to Marxism and left politics and also defining the parameters of left-wing politics. (see Chapter 1.) It also carried reportage on the movement, but it was concerned more with organizational issues such as the composition of the Punjab Kisan Committee and District Kisan Committees, rather than with detailed reporting of mass activity, which, in fact, was done far better by papers such as *The Tribune*. The *Kirti* also carried news of the left movement in Punjab to sympathizers abroad and was thus also a vehicle for collection of funds from Punjabi emigrants.

Pamphlets and posters were also used extensively. Pamphlets were often written by specialists or by leaders with a felicity for communicating ideas in a simple and graphic manner. They explained issues such as the burden of taxation, implications of new principles of assessment, the weight of debt on the peasant and the like.[43] Pamphlets provided the grass-roots activists

[42] The extent and depth of the reporting and the attention to detail that is found in *The Tribune*, the major English language newspaper of the nationalist era in Punjab, is truly impressive. For that reason, it emerged as a major source for this study. Newspapers with nationalist sympathies obviously saw themselves very differently from "professional" newspapers today. They were really providing a free service to the movement, carrying all its messages, transmitting information, conducting campaigns on its behalf and yet retaining their objectivity. They were a far cry from the newspapers of today, which more often than not become active participants in power struggles within and between political groups and parties or begin to fancy themselves in the role of making and unmaking governments—a task that is the job of the people in a democracy and not of the opinion-makers, no matter how powerful or persuasive they may be. Even the biggest of the journalists of the nationalist era would not think that their job was to actually run the movement—that was the task of the political leaders.

[43] To pick out just a few examples, Brij Narain's pamphlets on the land revenue system were used extensively in the Lyallpur agitation from 1933–35 and Karam Singh Mann's pamphlet on debt in the *karza* committee phase in 1935, as shown in Chapter 4. Achhar Singh Chhina's 'What is Socialism?' in pamphlet form was also popular. Surjeet said it was so popular that four editions had to be brought out. Interviews with Jagbir Singh Chhina and Harkishen Singh Surjeet.

as well as the educated members of peasant families, especially the young, with arguments against the prevailing structures of exploitation and governance, which they could then use in discussions and speeches. During periods of nation-wide struggle, pamphlets containing the nationalist message in various forms, ranging from exposition of the drain of wealth to nationalist songs, were very popular. Posters were very often pamphlets in abbreviated form, for, along with announcing meetings or conferences, they reiterated the issues around which struggle was to be waged. Posters concerned themselves with more immediate messages such as advocating the non-payment of certain taxes, or eliciting support for a *morcha*, or inviting attendance at a meeting.[44] Often prepared at the local level (unlike pamphlets which were written at higher levels of leadership), they are a good source for studying what kind of ideological understanding existed at the lower levels of leadership as well as for examining the idiom and imagery in which issues were transmitted to the masses of the people.

What was indeed the content of the ideology with which peasants were mobilized into political action? What was written in those pamphlets or posters? What did peasant activists say to them in discussions and meetings under the *banyan* tree, or in the *gurdwara* or from the makeshift stage set up at the *puranmashi* fair or the Jor Mela? What did the vision of the future they painted look like?

I would like to make it clear that I distinguish between ideology and consciousness. (Peasant consciousness forms the subject of the discussion in Chapters 11 and 12). The linkages between the two are very much there and yet they are distinct concepts. Ideologies are well-formulated, integrated systems of thought and are usually the creation of the intellectuals, whether traditional or modern and "organic". Consciousness is a more nebulous category and not necessarily and probably never identical with or only a product of ideologies, or even of contending ideologies, but emerges through much more intangible and complex processes and practices—cultural, political, social, economic, psychological—at every level of the social organism. Ideologies are, however, major contributors to and constituents of consciousness, as well as the major agent for its transformation.

To return to the ideology or ideologies found among the peasant activists in Punjab, we already know the demands they reiterated from platform after platform, for reducing land revenue, water rates, for abolishing *chowkidara* tax, malba, for reducing debts, for restoration of land, for

[44] Again, many activists, including Harkishen Singh Surjeet, pointed out that printing of posters was one of the tasks undertaken when organizing a big conference or *morcha*. *Interviews*. Government reports also contain many references to the use of posters. See, for example, Chapter 3, Section V, especially footnote 111. Occasionally, even a copy of a poster may be found, as in Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2193*, which I use as an illustration of ideology at the popular level a little later in this section.

reduction of extra illegal rent and the like. But demands of this nature can be integrated into very different kinds of ideological frameworks; they can be articulated with widely divergent ideological discourses. By themselves, they do not reveal the ideological content of the message. For that, we need to look at the ideology itself. It cannot be *deduced* from the demands (or, for that matter, from the forms of struggle or from the social origins of either the leaders or the participants). Nor does it always get translated into concrete demands around which actual struggles are waged, for that is also a function of the peasants' own consciousness and the extent to which it was advanced (see Chapter 11) and of contingent circumstances. Ideology often exists more in the form of a vision, which includes a critique of the past and the present. It does not become, for that reason, any less "real". On the contrary, it is a necessary part of movements seeking mass participation in the project of social transformation. It is to the precise content of this ideology, its components, the nuances and the shades within it, that we turn now.

Anti-imperialist nationalism was clearly the most dominant element in the ideological discourse carried by all shades of peasant activists to the peasants. It occupied the largest space within it and was its most potent component. Its pervasiveness as well as significance has already been discussed at great length in Chapter 8 and no repetition is necessary. But there were other components as well, such as the idea of democracy which went hand in hand, in the national movement and in the peasant movement, with the idea of nationalism. The future vision, as well as the actual practice of the national movement, was clearly democratic—it was consciously anti-monarchical, anti-authoritarian, anti-totalitarian. In fact, a basic critique of the colonial state made by the national movement was that it was not democratic, it did not base itself on fully representative institutions, it curbed civil liberties and freedom of the press and the like. All varieties of Congress activists, in their ideological campaigns, carried these ideas to the people, along with the ideas of the drain of wealth and the like. The Akali Movement for *gurdwara* reform had also carried an essentially democratic message—its main demand and success was that the *gurdwaras* and their properties and funds would be under the control of a democratically elected body, the Shiromani Gurdwara Prabandhak Committee (SGPC) and not remain under the control of hereditary priests. Besides, the actual practice of the Congress, its own internal democracy, elections extending from the village-level Congress committees to the AICC and the Working Committee at the national level, its projection of itself as the parliament of the people, all helped to convey in concrete terms the *modus operandi* of democratic functioning. And then, the experience of participating in elections to the legislatures, the franchise for which was extended, even though to a limited extent, in the 1936 elections. All these helped to structure

democratic ideas in the consciousness of peasants and helped them to conceive of systems of government that were not based on monarchy. Democratic consciousness was furthered not by the British who, in fact, had consciously used the idea of monarchy—as represented by the kings and queens of England who were made into emperors and empresses of India—to create legitimacy for their rule. It was furthered by the nationalists, who sought to do away with all forms of non-democratic governance, whether it was the emperor or the viceroy or the Indian princes who embodied these forms.[45] The Congress in British India, and the Praja Mandals in the princely states, popularized the notion of representative government, that people could rule themselves, that they had the right to choose their own rulers, who were not to be hereditary but removable. That these were new ideas is shown by the fact that the biggest revolt of the pre-national movement period was fought with Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor, and many other local potentates, at its head. In Punjab, the memory of Ranjit Singh's rule was still quite fresh, for his kingdom had been dissolved only in the 1840s. That these were all new ideas, brought from outside the village, is also apparent from the fact that people used to ask how was it possible to have a government without a king and then the idea of a republic—which has citizens and not subjects—would have to be explained to them.[46] These ideas may, however, have found relatively easier acceptance because the traditional functioning of the village *landowning* community was, at least in theory, on democratic lines, as shown by the existence of the concept of the *panchayat*.

The next in order of importance as a constituent of the ideological vision or discourse taken to the peasants was the notion of development, of national societal development. British rule was shown to have exploited Indian resources and resulted in poverty and economic backwardness. Independent India would launch itself on the path of progress, of economic development, which would then lead to a reduction of poverty, more employment, greater productivity, etc. Development was thus defined in ideology as the goal towards which India was aspiring—a goal that could not be reached without the British leaving and the drain of wealth coming to an end.

Development was conceived of as an end in itself and the systemic ideological parameters within which it was to be conducted were often not given that much importance, the only proviso being that it was egalitarian in content. (I discuss the component of egalitarianism at length a little later.)

[45] For the national movement's commitment to and struggle for parliamentary democracy, freedom of the press and civil liberties, see Chandra *Indian National Movement,* pp. 9–10 and Chandra in Chandra et al., *India's Struggle for Independence*, Chapters 8 and 39.

[46] Narain Singh Shahbazpuri was one of the activists who pointed this out most clearly (interview).

The Soviet Union, or socialism, was set up as an ideal at least partly, if not largely, because it was seen as the model of development. The US was another top favourite as a model, especially for the Ghadar/Kirtis who had lived there and it appears that at least at times their examples of the model system to which the peasants of Punjab were to aspire were taken as much, if not more, from the US than from the Soviet Union. Jagbir Singh Chhina, the nephew of Achhar Singh Chhina, the veteran Ghadar/Kirti leader who had been in both the US and the Soviet Union, in reply to a question about how Achhar Singh described the Soviet system, said:[47] "When everyone in the village collected to listen to him, Achhar Singh mostly talked about the USA. How an ordinary peasant, before going to work, has breakfast, how he wears trousers and goes in a horse-carriage. How the better-off ones ploughed with tractors. The harvest is cut, threshed, tied up and transported to the *mandis* on the same day." He added: "Of course, people wouldn't believe him. They were too backward for that." Similarly, the chairman of the reception committee of a Communist Kisan conference that was to be held in Rar in the state of Patiala on 14–15 August 1943, in his address, which was printed on the poster that announced the conference, after extending the "red salute" had rhetorically asked: "Is there any reason Patiala must remain in the 12 century? Why can it not become like Russia or *California*?" Clearly, since Russia and California were both accepted models of "development", he saw no irony in equating the two as ideals. However, it should be pointed out that the irony was perhaps blurred by the fact that the Californian model was, in its agrarian aspects, egalitarian in its own way, though different from the Soviet model. His emphasis on "development" is also revealed by his demand for the setting up of more factories.[48]

As an aside, I may point out here that Indian nationalists of all hues would have been horrified that later fashion would consider their faith in the ideals of development and progress as proof of their remaining within the framework of modern, rational and scientific thought which, because of its Western origins, was automatically a "colonial" world-view. In fact, they are more likely to have dismissed this later fashion as yet another example of a colonial world-view which, after all else has failed, now wants to stop ex-colonial people from participating in and sharing in the benefits of the project of development which have so long been cornered by the West. Nor are they likely to have had any more patience with the laboured attempts to create a rift between Gandhians and other nationalists along

[47] Interview with Jagbir Singh Chhina.

[48] Poster announcing a *Kisan* Conference at village Chaunear Mansa in October 1943, which contained the address of the chairman of the reception committee of the conference that was to be held earlier at Rar on 14–15 August, but could not be held because of police harassment. Poster attached in Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2193*.

lines of modern versus anti-modern, a rift that never existed in reality. Gandhiji's ideas were as much a product of the modern age as are the ideas of those who today deride modernism in the name of post-modernism or any other conveniently available off-the-shelf modern ideology.[49]

The next important ingredient of the ideological fare offered to the peasants by their leaders was the idea and vision of socialism. As demonstrated in Chapter 4, Section IV, the political space for the *mass propagation* of this idea was created by Jawaharlal Nehru's visits to the province in 1936 during his election tour of the country. The main burden of his message, as cited earlier in Chapter 4, Section IV, was that "the basic trouble in India is poverty with its attendant trouble of unemployment, indebtedness and distress. The only cure I know for these troubles is socialism, but as long as British imperialism is dominant in India socialism is impossible. Therefore the first step is the attainment of independence from British influence. Once you are free, everything can be done". I have already pointed out in Chapter 4, Section IV that there was "a rare unanimity among all our sources, ranging from the participant peasant leaders to contemporary government spokesmen, that Jawaharlal's tours, apart from furthering anti-imperialist consciousness, helped to create a general climate in favour of the idea of socialism...."

What was the content of this idea of socialism that was presented before the people? Jawaharlal Nehru, as was noted by contemporaries, never attempted to explain what he meant by socialism, and "probably deliberately so". This refusal by Nehru to identify it with any party or specific variety of Marxist canon had the advantage of enabling all sections of the left to put their own meanings into it.

The examples that we have of how precisely the socialist ideal was translated into concrete images indicate that it was projected essentially as an egalitarian system in which power would be in the hands of the poor and not the rich. Even Nehru, when he specified it at all, talked in terms of an ideal of "Panchayati Raj", "in which all powers would be in the hands of the poor and those who were at present masters, for example, police and other officials, would be the servants of the people". (see Chapter 4, Section IV.) This was also largely true of Communist and other left-wing activists who defined socialism at the grass-roots level. It was the aspect of social justice, of egalitarianism, of being pro-poor, that was emphasized and not so much aspects such as social ownership of means of production.

[49] Examples of this kind of view are to be found in Ashis Nandy, *The Intimate Enemy: The Loss and Recovery of the Self Under Colonialism*, Delhi, 1983; Partha Chatterjee, *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World: A Derivative Discourse*, Delhi, 1986; and Gyan Prakash, "Writing Post-Orientalist Histories of the Third World: Perspectives from Indian Historiography", *Comparative Studies in Society and History*, 32, 2, April 1990, pp. 383–408.

This was also because peasant leaders and activists themselves had found this aspect to be the main attraction of Marxism. Jagir Singh Joga, for example, one of the most long-lasting and respected leaders from Patiala, in answer to the question: "What was it about Marxism that appealed to you?", said: "That society cannot improve till the system of exploitation is done away with, till capitalism lasts".[50] Jagir Singh Chhina, who had the benefit of daily interaction with his uncle, Achhar Singh Chhina, and his comrades, in answer to the same question, replied: "The idea that those who work don't get anything and those who don't do any work, enjoy all the good things of life. And this will not end till the system is changed, till then the ordinary man will not get his due". He pointed out that he had acquired his Marxism by listening to the discussions that went on in his house among the Communist leaders and also by reading some pamphlets, such as Achhar Singh Chhina's well-known pamphlet titled "What is Socialism?"[51]

In any case, even if the leaders and the active cadre themselves were aware, in varying degrees, of various tenets of Marxist ideology and they had accepted some and rejected some of these tenets in their own thinking, this was not terribly important in terms of the image of socialism they placed before the peasantry. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, for example, in his interview, said that to the peasants, they emphasized that once socialism comes, they will not have to pay the type of taxes they paid at that time, all amenities will be provided by the state and their children would be looked after. The basic image was of an egalitarian society in which the poor would rule and in which there would be food and economic security for all. A particularly graphic example of this was provided by Jwala Singh Barapind, the illiterate grass-roots level political worker from a poor peasant family whom we have called as a witness on many occasions earlier.[52] He said that he was drawn towards socialist ideas after his return from jail in the Civil Disobedience Movement in the early 1930s. He would go to Bradlaugh Hall in Lahore where study circles were conducted by Munshi Ahmed Din, Principal Chhabil Das and others. "In the study circles, we were taught that capitalism must be ended. Mazdoors and kisans must be united. What kind of system has to be set up, what will there be in that system?" He then described this ideal system: "A village will be divided into four parts, there will be four *langars* or community kitchens, each part will have its own committee, and another committee will oversee these. This committee will plan how much cloth the village needs, how many shoes, how many children's shoes, how much food. And everything will be arranged within the village itself. And there will be a doctor for those who fall ill".

[50] Interview.
[51] Interview.
[52] The following account is based on his interview.

He then went on to say, without a trace of self-consciousness, that "I was also asked to take study circles. So for those who were uninformed, who knew even less than me, for them I held study circles". And what did he say in those study circles: "I explained to them what we would get in a cooperative system. Every evening everyone would get meat and eggs to eat, they would get medicines, doctors would be there. Everyone would have two sets of clothes, everyone would have enough and would not need to steal from another".

That this egalitarian ideal was capable of being translated into reality was driven home by the example of the Soviet Union. It was reiterated time and again that a *mazdoor-kisan raj* did indeed exist in one country in the world—the Soviet Union.[53] Ruldu Khan, the leader of the tenants-at-will of Ferozepore, said that in the big political conferences, where political issues were to the fore, as distinct from the local-level meetings at which anti-landlord issues were concentrated upon, "the emphasis was on the system in the Soviet Union, the development that had taken place there, how human beings are treated as human beings there. Here, we are not considered human beings, we are oppressed. Some are high and some are low".[54] That the image of the Soviet Union as a country that represented a non-exploitative system had spread fairly widely is shown by the remark made by Wadhawa Ram, the leader of the tenants of the canal colonies: "Poor people knew there was a country called Russia. When I used to wander in the villages, old women would ask me: "We are in great distress. Will somebody sent a letter to Russia?" And I would reply: "We have sent a letter, but no reply has come as yet".[55]

Another element of the conception of socialism was that it would be a "*mazdoor–kisan raj*" or workers' and peasants' rule. The emphasis was not on the notion of the dictatorship of the proletariat, but on a combined rule by workers and peasants.[56] Given the peasant audience to which it was directed and the peasant origins of the activists who understood and carried the message, this was understandable and inevitable. You could not rally landowning peasants behind the flag of socialism by promising to deprive them of their land ownership! However, this "peasant" flavour of socialism was not, it appears, a dupe—at least many Punjab Communist peasant leaders do seem to have believed in it. That this was not in consonance

[53] This was so common that specific references are redundant.

[54] Interview.

[55] Interview.

[56] Again, this was so pervasive an idea that specific references are redundant. Even the name of the party founded in 1928 by the Communists was the Kirti–Kisan Party or Workers' and Peasants' Party. In Jullundur, for a long time, Communists worked under the name of Kisan Mazdoor Dal or Peasants' and Workers' Party. Note the reversal in order—the peasant component of the name comes first.

with orthodox Marxism, and especially its contemporary Soviet variety, is another matter. It is true that we do not find any evidence of their positive rejection, at the theoretical level, of ideas of collectivization or co-operativization of land and the like but that could be more a function of strait-jacketing of ideas and lack of encouragement of dissent by the top levels of the Communist Party leadership and the inability of lower-level leaders to engage in high-flown theoretical debates couched in Marxist jargon—the only style of debate legitimized by Marxist tradition and acceptable to the communist parties and that too usually restricted to the top—than a sign of the acceptance of the anti-peasant bias of contemporary Marxism.[57] There is little evidence, anyway, of these ideas, even if they were accepted at the level of leadership or cadre, being carried to the peasants.

The emphasis, as far as the issue of land was concerned, was on the following. Among tenants, the notion of land to the tiller was sought to be popularized at the level of ideology, though, as shown in detail in Chapter 4, it was not incorporated into any concrete struggle, except in cases of "restoration" of land. Ruldu Khan, for example, gave a beautiful illustration of how this idea was communicated to tenants.[58] Narrating a typical speech that he delivered to the tenants-at-will of the Sodhis and the Nawab of Mamdot in his native Ferozepore District (see Chapter 6), he said: "We would say the land belongs to God". Ruldu Khan continued: "Nobody comes here with a pre-ordained *patta* (a deed of right) to the land. If they have the right to be *maliks* (owners), we too have the right to be owners. We are also human beings." He then went on to describe what I think is one of the most apposite imageries that could be used to express the idea of land to the tiller: "Just as one draws lines (or writes) in a *bahi* (accounts register or notebook), so too have we drawn lines with (written with) the plough on this land. *We have written with the plough that this land is ours*".

Ruldu Khan's formulation that the land belongs to God bears striking similarly to Gandhiji's invocation of the traditional notion that all land belongs to Gopal. In a speech at Faizpur in December 1936, he said:[59]

> Real socialism has been handed down to us by our ancestors who taught: "All land belongs to Gopal, where then is the boundary line? Man is the maker of the line and he can therefore unmake it". Gopal literally means shepherd; it also means God. In modern language it means the State, i.e., the people. That the land today does not belong to the people is too

[57] Complaints of strait-jacketing of ideas and suppression of dissent were voiced by many communist activists, generally and especially with reference to the Peoples' War and Muslim nationality lines of the Communist Party. Particularly outspoken on this score were Jagjit Singh Anand, Jwala Singh Barapind, Chain Singh Chain, Sushila Chain, Karam Singh Mann, Bhagat Singh Bilga and Harkishen Singh Surjeet (interview).

[58] Interview.

[59] Mahatma Gandhi, *Collected Works*, Vol. 64, p. 192.

> true. But the fault is not in the teaching. It is in us who have not lived up to it. I have no doubt that we can make as good an approach to it as it possible for any nation, not excluding Russia, and that without violence.... Land and all property is his who will work it. Unfortunately the workers are or have been kept ignorant of this simple fact.

There was also the notion of equitable distribution of land, which was sought to be implemented in Patiala when the occupancy tenants managed to occupy the land in the chaotic conditions in 1949–51, but it was not a very successful effort. Those who recovered the land to which they thought they had old rights were most reluctant to part with it in pursuance of any ideology. Even the small bits of land that were actually given to some tenants-at-will and landless wage labourers under Communist pressure here and there were most often lost by them once the occupancy tenants got the legal right to the land through tenancy legislation.[60]

And what about religion? How did it figure in this ideological discourse? It can be stated quite categorically that no evidence has been found in the course of this study of the peasant leaders, whether of the Congress, Congress Socialist, or Communist variety, carrying any elements of communal ideology to the peasants. Their ideology can be described as positively secular, with no attempt being made to organize either on communal lines or by emphasizing religious difference. Neither against the British, nor against local exploiters, like moneylenders or landlords, was religious difference or communal identity ever used, even as a crutch. Yes, religious imagery was often used, characters from religious mythology or from the past were invoked as exemplers, but this had no communal connotations. Invoking the medieval Sikh tradition of struggle against oppression to rally peasants into struggle against the British and against the maharajas and landlords, which was regularly done, could by no stretch of imagination be classified as communal. When the Communists said to the Patiala peasants that we are acting more in the interests of the Sikh *panth* than Master Tara Singh's Akalis (see Chapter 7), they were by no means suggesting that they were more efficient communalists; they meant, and they were understood as meaning, that they were better fighters against oppression. The Communists were quite legitimate in trying to identify with the best traditions of resistance of the Akali Movement of the early 1920s and to prevent it being hijacked by the by now communal Akalis. They had every right to do so,

[60] Interviews with Jagir Singh Joga, G.S. Randhawa and Giani Bachan Singh. Harkishen Singh Surjeet also pointed out that in this movement there was weakness on the issue of land to the tiller, as also in Ferozepore, and in Una. He said we could not touch the occupancy tenants once they became owners. "You can touch only in the process of struggle itself, not after they become owners, they will not then part with their land" (Interview). Dalip Singh Tapiala also talked about the difficulties and weaknesses of the movement on this aspect. Also see Chapter 12.

especially since those like Jagir Singh Joga or Bhagwan Singh Longowalia or Sohan Singh Josh who were now Communist peasant leaders had contributed as much, if not more, to the non-communal Akali Movement of the 1920s as those who had thrown in their lot with the communal wing led by Master Tara Singh. It was their effective tapping of the peasants' living consciousness of their cultural traditions (which were often inextricably linked with religion) that enabled them to carry their essentially new and modern message to the peasants. When the speaker at the huge Patiala Kisan Conference held at Tungwali in Ferozepore District on 6 and 7 September 1944 said that "we want that the Akalis should exist but they should be like Akali Phula Singh who punished even Maharaja Ranjit Singh and not like the present-day Akalis", he was not strengthening communal Akali influence but making a damning reference to Master Tara Singh who, unlike the historical figure Akali Phula Singh, who had stood up to as great a ruler as Ranjit Singh, had bowed down before and had sold his soul to the Patiala Maharaja for, if not a few pieces, then certainly for a hoard of silver. (see Chapter 7.) When their main contestants for the peasants' affection were the Akalis, who continuously tried to project themselves as the inheritors and perpetuators of the old Sikh tradition of resistance and of the new Akali tradition of anti-imperialism, the Communists too had to counter them with references to that same tradition—they could not abandon the terrain of argument based on culture, tradition or religion and simply go on talking in modern or "secular" or Marxist language unless they wanted to concede the ground to the Akalis.

In fact, my critique of the Communists would be that they did not do this consistently enough, they did not engage the Akalis and other communal elements in as continuous an ideological debate as was necessary and relied much too much on their superiority as organizers and fighters for the peasants' economic demands to maintain their hegemony over the peasants. The critique of the Communists on this issue is the same as the critique of other nationalists, of the Congress, of Gandhiji, of Nehru: they could not perceive the magnitude of the impending communal challenge and could not devise effective ways of countering it. The critique is not that they were themselves open to communal bias—they were not, neither the Communists, nor the Congress, nor its leaders can be accused of that failing. Similarly, just as Gandhiji's symbolism of Ram rajya was not a cause of the growth of Muslim communalism because it was meant, and understood to be meant, as a reference to an ideal, utopian state and society, and not as a Hindu raj,[61] similarly the Communists' attempt to project themselves as

[61] Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, for example, said very clearly that Ram rajya did not mean Hindu raj but a system in which there was prosperity, no oppression, the land revenue was less, etc. He said that they too used the concept of Ram rajya in their speeches. He was also

the militant upholders of the Sikh religious tradition of uncompromising struggle against oppression was not meant, nor was it seen to be meant, as their identification with any ideology based on the notion of the existence of separate "Sikh" interests.[62]

The Communists also did not, and wisely so, pit themselves against religion as such, despite their own personal agnosticism or atheism. Again, they tried to use religious imagery in a humanist way, by invoking the notions of justice and humanitarianism embedded in religion. When Ruldu Khan said that the land belongs to God and no one comes into this world with a pre-ordained *patta* or right to land, and when Jagir Singh Joga sought to overturn the *biswedars'* claim to land on the basis that God had ordained that this was their land, by saying that our God has also spoken to us and he has told us that this is our land,[63] they were clearly rallying the same God on the side of the poor and the oppressed that Gandhiji was trying to rally through the concept of *daridranarayan* or the God of the poor and via his statement that all land belongs to *Gopal*. Neither of them were guilty of "using" religion for political ends in the sense that it is used by communalists. They were only locating themselves and their ideas within the cultural/religious traditions of the people they were addressing and leading. They were divesting their ideas of their exotic shell and clothing them in indigenous garb more familiar to their audience.

In the case of caste, the picture is even clearer, and the need for argument or proof proportionately less. Even where, as in parts of central Punjab, the vast majority of the peasant participants were Jat Sikhs, that is, they belonged to the same caste, no evidence is available of caste identity being used to rally them into struggle. When different castes participated, as in the tenants' struggles in the canal colonies or in Ferozepore or in Una, the chances of this were any way less. The critique could, in fact, be that Communist leaders did not pay sufficient attention to the issue of the oppression and exploitation of the low caste and untouchable members of the village, an oppression in which caste consciousness played a considerable role. They did not struggle against the upper caste consciousness of their landowning peasant supporters, as has been discussed at length in

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categorical that ordinary Muslims never objected, only the communalized ones would object, and these were the rich landlords, etc., who were anyway with the British (Interview). I may point out here that the meaning of Ram rajya was explained to us in terms identical to the ones used by Narain Singh Shahbazpuri virtually all over the country by all variety of activists in the course of our research on the national movement.

[62] Again, Narain Singh Shahbazpuri was categorical that they did not use religious difference for mobilization. "We never said the British are against our religion." About the Sikh religious tradition, he said: "we never portrayed it as anti-Muslim, but anti-oppression. Guru Govind Singh fought against oppression" (interview).

[63] Interview.

Chapters 10 and 11. But they did not, at the same time, strengthen this consciousness or appeal to it to ease their task of mobilization.

The armoury of weapons marshalled by the peasants and their leaders in their battles was essentially a modern one. The peasants of Punjab formed peasant associations and joined political parties and participated in public meetings and demonstrations, agitations and nation-wide mass movements. They voted in elections to the local bodies, the provincial assembly and the central legislature. Their leaders set up enquiry committees, collected evidence and used their findings to argue their case before the authorities and the people. Propaganda was conducted through the press, the public platform, through pamphlets and posters. The examples are endless. All the forms were essentially modern, products of the modern world and characteristic of modern politics.

It is necessary to emphasize this feature of peasant politics because it is often assumed that peasants are "traditional", tied to old ways and, therefore, incapable of participation in modern politics. Also, the continuation of certain traditional forms of expression is often cited as proof of this assumption. The actual evidence of peasant politics in Punjab in the period of our study (and in the country as a whole) stands, in my view, as a complete refutation of this assumption. On the contrary, the peasants that we have just encountered, proved remarkably adaptable and receptive to the new forms of politics and the new modern ideology demanded by the new world in which they lived. They may not have grasped all its complexities, but they had understood, with the help of their leaders, many of its essentials.

The continuation of certain traditional forms of political expression is often misread as proof of functioning within the parameters of pre-modern or pre-colonial politics. This misreading occurs because the forms are divorced from the context in which they occur and thus their new meaning is missed. If one were to emulate this kind of approach, one could easily cite the fact that even the left leadership used traditional fairs or *melas* as occasions for organizing their political activity as proof of the continuation of traditional forms. Such a formulation would be misleading, however, since it fails to grasp the fact that the content of what was said in those meetings at the *melas* was anything but traditional, that, in fact, it was the new modern form of a public meeting that was being popularized by being conducted in a familiar, traditional setting. It would also be wrong because it would be based on ignoring one of the larger realities that most public meetings were being organized on days and at places that had no traditional significance—either religious or customary. In other words, it was modern politics that was incorporating some of those traditional forms that facilitated its own processes and increased its effectiveness. Another good example of this is the institution of *langar* or free kitchen that is a part of the

Sikh religious tradition. This institution was adapted into a modern context by organizing *langars*, not in *gurdwaras* or at religious gatherings, but at political conferences. The peasants accepted this new role of the *langar* and, as we have seen, contributed freely for the purpose. Enriching of modern politics by absorption of traditional forms and idioms in a creative manner is a healthy and inevitable process that enables modern politics to implant its roots more firmly in the new soil.

Similarly, when the Patiala tenants fled to the neighbouring British territory to escape having to pay *batai* and when they and their leaders used the greater freedom available in the British area to carry on their agitation against Patiala, they were adapting to their present needs the age-old Indian peasant tradition of *hijrat* or migration to the neighbouring territory of a less oppressive ruler who offered better conditions or lower rates of land revenue. This did not mean that their politics had remained fixed in a traditional mould, any more than the politics of the Gujarati peasants of Bardoli or Kheda who took refuge in the territory of the princely state of Baroda to escape British repression and avoid payment of land revenue in 1928 and 1930–31. (see Chapter 3.) The weapon of social boycott, of refusing supplies and services to government functionaries, was also used by the peasants in Punjab, as, for example, in Jhaman and Tharu in the Civil Disobedience Movement (see Chapter 3) and in Patiala against the *biswedars* (see Chapter 7), though not as extensively as it was used elsewhere, as, for example, in Bardoli in 1928. This too was a traditional weapon. Its traditional role was primarily to enforce the observance of caste and religious norms and thus maintain the status quo;[64] its new role was to isolate those who stood for the status quo and wanted to obstruct change. Those who are unable to see that old forms acquire a new meaning in the new context need to be reminded that "history is a discipline of context and of process: every meaning is a meaning-in-context, and structures change while old forms may express new functions or old functions may find expression in new forms."[65]

[64] It was used in its traditional form by landowning peasants against the lower caste Balmikis who were resisting compulsory adherence to caste norms in village Baghiana in Lahore District in 1927, as described at length in Chapter 2, Section III.

[65] Thompson, 1977, p. 256.

TEN

Peasants and Outsiders: Social Origins of Leaders and Participants

Who were the actors who strode upon the stage to enact the historical drama of peasant protest that we have been witnessing? They appeared before us in their stage costumes, but what were their identities in "real life"? Or rather, what were the identities they were born with, or had before they also took on the new identity of fighters against injustice and oppression? Who among them were the leaders or the heroes? And did the drama, to be successful, need the heroes? Or did the heroes push their way in and try to hog the lines meant to be delivered by other actors? Or was it that the lines they delivered could only be delivered by them, since only they knew the language in which they were written? Were the heroes "outsiders" or "insiders", or both? Why did some actors have larger parts and other smaller? Did they get parts that suited their talents, or capacities, or were they kept out of desired parts because the script-writer or the director could not conceive of roles that they could play? These are the kinds of questions to which, in this chapter, answers are being sought—in the evidence presented in this study, as well as in other studies of peasant protest and also in some theoretical frameworks designed to answer these questions.

"Outside" Ideologies and "Outsider" Leaders

Are peasants capable, on their own, of changing the world in which they live into a better place? Can they give birth to ideologies that express their interests in a manner that other classes of society can be brought under their sway? Has there ever been a social system or is it possible to have a system in which the ruling ideology is that of the peasants? Can there be a peasant system in the manner in which there have been monarchical and

feudal systems, or bourgeois and socialist ones? And if not, what implications does this have for an understanding of the role that "outside" ideologies and the carriers of those ideologies, play in the life of the peasants?

The classic Marxist answer to the question is that, unlike the bourgeoisie or the working class, the peasantry does not have its own independent perspective of development: in the modern world it is destined to eventually adopt or operate within the hegemonic ideology of either the bourgeoisie or the working class. It cannot and does not have a world view or ideology which encompasses all aspects of society. As a result, it not only cannot carry out ideological struggle for hegemonization of other social classes and strata, it cannot but be hegemonized by either bourgeois or socialist ideology. The task of Marxist revolutionaries, especially in the colonial countries where the peasantry constituted the mass of the oppressed, was therefore to unite the workers and peasants by taking up the peasants' struggles against economic exploitation and for land and bringing out their relevance to the long-term struggle for socialism and social reconstruction and thus to take socialist ideas and consciousness to the peasantry.

Further, the peasantry, by the very nature of its productive activity—cultivation on individual or family basis of separate plots and farms in scattered villages—is dispersed and difficult to organize, unlike the workers who engage in collective work in factories concentrated in towns and cities. The difficulty increases because, in the modern world, the peasantry is not a homogenous social class and the difficulty assumes an intense form in the case of a differentiated peasantry like that of India, when some sections of it are bourgeois, petty-bourgeois, semi-proletarian and proletarian, some even semi-feudal (such as *jotedars,* petty landlords, etc.), while still others are even more difficult to characterize. Therefore, in the case of the peasantry, the need for outside help and organization, whether by the radical intelligentsia committed to peasantism or by parties, groups and individuals with a socialist orientation, was urgent and inevitable. In Marx's words, "they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented". The passage in Marx's writings which concludes with the sentence just quoted, bears citation at length:[1]

> The small proprietors form an immense mass, the members of which live in the same situation but do not enter into manifold relationships with each other. Their mode of operation isolates them instead of bringing them into mutual intercourse.... Thus the great mass of the French nation is formed by the simple addition of isomorphous magnitudes, much as potatoes in a sack form a sack of potatoes. In so far as millions of families live under economic conditions of existence that separate their

[1] Karl Marx, "The Eighteenth Brumaire of Louis Bonaparte", in Karl Marx, *Surveys from Exile: Political Writings*, Vol. 2, Harmondsworth, 1973, pp. 238–39.

> mode of life, their interests and their cultural formation from those of other classes and bring them into conflict with those classes, they form a class. In so far as these small peasant proprietors are merely connected on a local basis, and the identity of their interests fails to produce a feeling of community, national links, or a political organisation, they do not form a class. They are therefore incapable of asserting their class interest in their own name, whether through a parliament or through a convention. They cannot represent themselves; they must be represented.

In essence, this is the perspective accepted by and large by the Marxist historiographical approach to the study of the peasantry and peasant movements in colonial India. It is so widely accepted that any substantiation is really redundant. Indian Communists devoted a major part of their revolutionary energy to the organization of the peasants on the basis of this understanding. Nor has this perspective been challenged by any of the later Marxist theoreticians or social scientists, either in India or elsewhere. Chesneaux, the famous Marxist historian of the Chinese peasantry, reiterates that Maoism also did not deviate from this understanding. To quote: "the essential contribution of what we may for convenience call 'Maoism' does not lie in a modification of revolutionary theory; it does not see the peasantry as a revolutionary class endowed with an absolute, semi-messianic 'Mandate'. It does not question the ultimate subordination of the peasantry to those modern historical forces which alone are capable of leading the revolution to victory—socialist ideology and the Communist Party, both born of industrial society".[2]

The Marxist perspective is echoed by other peasant experts. Eric R. Wolf, for example, whose work is marked by great sophistication and empathy, says categorically:[3] "Marxists have long argued that peasants without outside leadership cannot make a revolution; and our case material would bear them out. Where the peasantry has successfully rebelled against the established order—under its own banner and with its own leaders—it was sometimes able to reshape the social structure of the countryside closer to its heart's desires; but it did not lay hold of the state, of the cities which house the centers of control, of the strategic nonagricultural resources of the society".

Wolf also believes that those specific characteristics of the peasantry which create the need for outside leaders[4] also indicate that the "peasant is

[2] Chesneaux, *Peasant Revolts in China*, pp. 156–57.

[3] Eric R. Wolf , *Peasant Wars of the Twentieth Century*, London, 1971, p. 294.

[4] To quote: "First, a peasant's work is most often done alone, on his own land, than in conjunction with his fellows. Moreover, all peasants are to some extent competitors, for available resources within the community as well as for sources of credit from without. Second, the tyranny of work weighs heavily upon a peasant.... Third, control of land enables him,

especially handicapped in passing from passive recognition of wrongs to political participation as a means for setting them right.... Hence, peasants are often merely passive spectators of political struggles or long for the sudden advent of a millennium, without specifying for themselves and their neighbours the many rungs on the staircase to heaven".[5]

The overwhelming historical evidence of the course and fate of peasant protest in pre-modern times as well as of archaic or pre-modern resistance in modern times makes it difficult to question the validity of the Marxist understanding. After all, any study of peasant protest has to come to terms with the fact that, though peasant rebellions have taken place since the earliest times, as for example in China, such rebellions could at best only replace one dynasty or ruler by another; they proved incapable of providing any alternative "peasant" system and invariably accepted monarchy as the organizing principle of the state and of society as a whole. Chesneaux, in fact, goes so far as to say that "in the last analysis, peasant revolts served to confirm the Confucian theory of the Mandate of Heaven, consolidating the traditional political system by purging it when this became necessary..., they never challenged more than the abuses of the traditional regimes...."[6] It was only with the Communists—the revolutionary "élite" as the élite theorists would put it—turning to the peasantry that the peasants were organized into a revolutionary force that became the instrument for effecting a socialist transformation of Chinese society. The Chinese peasantry, on its own, in the twentieth century as in many centuries preceding, could only rebel against oppression but had found no way of altering the very structure of that oppression.

Bianco, another expert on the Chinese peasantry and one who has a less sympathetic approach to the Communist Revolution in China than Chesneaux, makes the same point by comparing the peasant movements in the 1920s and 1930s in non-Communist areas with those in Communist areas and also points to the fact that many of the early Communist-led "militant" peasant movements were hardly proper peasant movements and were, in fact, composed of student radicals, urban revolutionaries,

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more often than not, to retreat into subsistence production should adverse conditions affect his market crop. Fourth, ties of extended kinship and mutual aid within the community may cushion the shocks of dislocation. Fifth—peasant interests—especially among poor peasants—often crosscut class alignments. Rich and poor peasants may be kinfolk, or a peasant may be at one and the same time owner, renter, share-cropper, laborer for his neighbours and seasonal hand on a nearby plantation. Each different involvement aligns him differently with his fellows and with the outside world. Finally, past exclusion of the peasant from participation in decision-making beyond the bamboo hedge of his village deprives him all too often of the knowledge needed to articulate his interests with appropriate forms of action." *Ibid.*, pp. 289–90.

[5] *Ibid*.

[6] Chesneaux, *Peasant Revolts in China*, p. 21.

demobilized soldiers and other *de-classe* elements of rural society, that is, they did not prove the inherent revolutionariness of the Chinese peasantry; it was "the Communist leaders (who) were in the end able to weld the Chinese peasantry into a revolutionary force".[7] Nor was the transformation as widespread as it is generally supposed, he argues, and the numerous instances of "revolutionariness" were more evidence of class hatred and antagonism than proof of the peasants' radicalism. To quote, "the defense of the interests of one's own class or group should not be identified with being radical. The Communists finally succeeded in helping some of the peasants transcend simple hatred and make the transition to radicalism, but it was a big jump". In fact, Bianco is categorical in his conclusion that the "tremendous achievement" of the Chinese peasants, that they were the "victors of 1949", "was a case of 'guided political action', in which 'a closely knit group of activists having its own impetus, specific organisational structure, aims and leadership' organises and mobilises the peasantry. In twentieth century China, peasant masses alone were not capable of seizing power in the countryside".[8]

In a similar vein, Chesneaux states that:[9]

> it would be wrong to overemphasize the positive contribution of the peasant movements to the history of China. They may have added to the difficulties of the imperial regime, they may have obstructed the designs of the west and hastened the fall of the dynasty; but they were never capable of putting China on to a new historical path, more favourable to their own interest. They did not, nor were they able to, produce a revolutionary programme or a revolutionary solution.

He continues:[10]

> the peasant movement, as an essential part of the Communist revolution after 1927, was not the product of internal and spontaneous evolution of the peasantry itself. The study of twentieth century China does not confirm the theory of Frantz Fanon and his followers that the peasantry is a kind of inherently revolutionary class. The peasants have not acted as an independent historical force. In the last analysis, political hegemony has continued to belong to those forces in the historical process which have succeeded in setting the peasantry in motion; that is to say, the Communist movement with its proletarian roots and proletarian ideology, with its party and army—the instruments of modern revolutionary struggle.

[7] Bianco, *Peasants and Revolution*, pp. 324–25, 331.
[8] *Ibid.*, pp. 328, 330.
[9] Chesneaux, *Peasants Revolts in China*, p. 75.
[10] *Ibid.*, p. 153.

If this is true of the Chinese peasantry, with a tradition of revolt much stronger than that of the Indian peasantry, it seems that the case for the inherent and autonomous revolutionariness or even rebelliousness of the Indian peasantry stands on rather flimsy ground and is difficult to sustain. In India, peasant revolts or dissent movements in medieval times did not even succeed in changing one imperial dynasty or ruler for another, though they contributed to significant changes in the balance of local or regional political and social forces; the organizing principles of the state and of society remained those that ensured the dominance of the monarchical and zamindari–jagirdari elements.[11] In colonial India as well, till at least the end of the nineteenth century, the peasant movements and rebellions that emerged, even when they had egalitarian elements in their ideology and even when they succeeded in forcing the colonial state to introduce some reforms, continued, by and large, to be characterized by traditional ideologies. Nor did the tribal rebellions, which by their very nature had greater egalitarian tendencies and greater solidarity and cohesion, prove more capable of transcending these limitations.

Eric Wolf, too, on the basis of his study of twentieth-century peasant protest in six countries—Mexico, Russia, China, Vietnam, Algeria and Cuba—comes to the conclusion that:[12]

> Where the peasantry has successfully rebelled against the established order—under its own banner and with its own leaders—it was sometimes able to reshape the social structure of the countryside closer to its heart's desires; but it did not lay hold of the state, of the cities which house the centers of control, of the strategic non-agricultural resources of the society. Zapata (of Mexico) stayed in his Morelos; the 'folk migration' of Pancho Villa (of Mexico) receded after the defeat at Torreon; Nestor Makhno (of the Ukraine) stopped short of the cities; and the Russian peasants of the Central Agricultural Region simply burrowed more deeply into their local communes. Thus a peasant rebellion which takes place in a complex society already caught up in commercialization and industrialization tends to be self-limiting, and, hence, anachronistic.

This long "history" of the limits of peasant and tribal resistance and rebellion is, however, of no consequence as far as the writers of "subaltern" history are concerned. Again, assertions take the place of analysis and the tendency to ignore their own evidence becomes marked. Take the case of David Arnold who begins his account of the Gudem-Rampa tribal uprising

[11] See Irfan Habib, "The Peasant in Indian History", in *Social Scientist*, 11, 3, March 1983, pp. 59–63. This essay was first presented as the Presidential Address, Indian History Congress, 1982 and was reprinted in Irfan Habib, *Essays in Indian History: Towards a Marxist Perception*, New Delhi, 1995.

[12] Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, p. 294.

in Andhra by loudly protesting against "conventional academic wisdom about the sub-continent (which) stresses ... fatalism and passivity" and against "conventional historiography" in which "peasants appear as the victims of history, not as its principals", in which "they have revenue systems imposed upon them, they are invaded by the modern state, they are harangued and mobilised by the nationalist orator and activist". His own evidence, and his own conclusions, however, appear to be more in line with the "conventional historiography" he chastises with such vigour, than with the "new historiography" he aspires to be part of. In his own account, the tribals not only have new revenue systems but "new systems of land use and labour" imposed on them, they are invaded by the modern state, by moneylenders and contractors from the plains. Nor is he able to turn "the victims of history" into "its principals", as is clear from his following statement: "The transformation, so profoundly destructive of the old order, left them discontented and, in the end, defeated. Against the combined strength of the state and the *sahukar*, they felt ultimately powerless to resist", and came to resemble "countless other 'backward' peoples throughout the world who, with their traditional society shattered by the invasion of western capitalism, have turned to drink and drugs for consolation."[13] If those who are "defeated" and rendered "powerless to resist", to the point that they have to turn "to drink and drugs for consolation", are not the "victims" of history but its "principals", then the terms seem to have lost all meaning!

Unlike the "subalternists", who are victims of their own "one-sided and blinkered historiography"—the phrase is not mine: I am merely returning the compliment paid by Ranajit Guha to "élite" historiography—Indian Marxist scholars, to whom the honour properly goes for restoring the "people" to Indian history and their history to the people, have not hesitated to face squarely the thorny questions thrown up by the history of popular resistance in India. Irfan Habib, for example, who rescued the history of the decline of the Mughal empire from the clutches of court intrigues, fratricidal wars, indolent emperors and communal diatribes and secured the peasant revolts a major role in the process,[14] does not flinch from stating that a "basic" feature, and the "remarkable deficiency", of Indian peasant uprisings before modern times "is their comparatively backward level of class-consciousness". "The peasants might fuel a zamindar's revolt (Marathas); they might rise in a locality (the Doab) or as a caste (Jats), or as a sect (Satnamis, Sikhs), but they fail to attain a recognition of any common objectives that transcended parochial limits". "The goals of the uprising in

[13] David Arnold, "Rebellious Hillmen: The Gudem Rampa Rising, 1839–1924", in Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I*, pp. 88–89, 116–17.

[14] See Irfan Habib, *Agrarian System of Mughal India*: *1556–1707*, Bombay, 1963.

each case were not those of the peasants; and for them the fundamental conditions remained unaltered". He contrasts this with China, where the "peasant revolts with specific demands for tax-reductions have caused dynastic changes" and with the English rising of 1381 and the peasant wars in Germany in the sixteenth century, in which "the peasants came forward with the objective of securing specific changes in their legal and economic status".[15]

Also, it is clear that in his view this weakness remained a feature of nineteenth-century Indian peasant uprisings as well, for he unambiguously states that "the peasantry's first steps towards the attainment of its self-awareness is an achievement of the national movement, for whose success the peasants were so largely responsible". Further, because he recognizes this "historical failure", he goes on to offer "at least a provisional (and partial) explanation". He suggests that the answers may be found in "the caste divisions in our society, the immense gulf between the peasantry and the 'menial' proletariat, and the deeply rooted authority of the zamindars".[16]

However, sadly enough, none of the historians who claim to talk about the subalterns' own consciousness have shown any inclination to examine the implications of these specific features of Indian society, or their reflection in the consciousness of the Indian peasants. This disinclination is not accidental, it stems from their basic assumptions and methodology, from their paradigm itself. The "subaltern" method, as elaborated by Ranajit Guha in his full-length study of "peasant insurgency", is to first identify and isolate certain aspects of 'peasant insurgency' by studying peasant rebellions between 1783 and 1900, that is, when they were "in a relatively 'pure' state before the politics of nationalism and socialism begin to penetrate the countryside on a significant scale".[17] The aspects that he isolates and which constitute his "paradigm" of insurgency are concerned more with the forms which peasants adopt in the course of rebellion than with either the ideological content or the causation or objectives or leadership of rebellion. He is concerned only with how the peasants express themselves, how they loot, burn or kill, how they maintain solidarity, how they mobilize through rumour, how they express themselves in a religious idiom, how they mobilize only their caste men and neighbours in the locality and the like.[18] Why they do so at any particular time, who leads them and what

[15] *Habib*, "The Peasant in Indian History", p. 63.

[16] *Ibid.*, pp. 63–64.

[17] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, p. 13.

[18] Chapter 1, on Negation, discusses the various ways in which rebels reject the authority structure by inverting or negating the signs and symbols and language of domination; Chapter 2, on Ambiguity, discusses the question of how to identify the more ambiguous forms of resistance which get classified as dacoity and other forms of crime; Chapter 3, on Modality, is about how rebellions are organized; Chapter 4, is on Solidarity, Chapter 5, titled

are the aims that they seek to achieve—these are not questions or "aspects" that fall within Guha's area of interest and, therefore, they do not constitute "elements" of his "paradigm".

This "exclusion" is also a consequence of the method he adopts for studying peasant resistance. He does not discuss the peasant rebellions that he has selected for study as distinct wholes: a method that would make it difficult to exclude the crucial issues of causation, objectives and leadership. Instead, his method is to select the evidence relating to the "aspects" that form part of his paradigm from the whole body of evidence extant about the rebellions, to remove it from its "context" and then arrange this evidence into chapters dealing with these specific aspects.[19] Thus, for example, his only attempt at dealing with the question of causation consists of a general summary of agrarian conditions covering a couple of pages at the beginning of the book.[20] Inevitably, this summary only provides the barest of outlines of the "objective" conditions in which peasants revolted; it tells us nothing about why different groups of peasants revolted in different places at different times. Similarly, there is just one paragraph in the introduction which addresses itself to the question of the "aim and programme" of peasant rebellions and Guha is quite content to merely assert that "none of them were quite aimless" and that the objectives were "power in one form or another". He is only willing to define their objectives in negative terms and that too in the form of a bald statement and not by way of a full-fledged analysis: "the raj they wanted to substitute for the one they were out to destroy did not quite conform to the model of a secular and national state and their concept of power failed to rise above loicalism, sectarianism and ethnicity...."[21]

A full critique of Guha's method is not possible here but the implications of his method need to be spelt out. Having identified these "elementary aspects of peasant insurgency" in their "pure" state in the nineteenth century, Guha's method is to place all mass mobilizations of the twentieth century alongside this paradigm and if the resemblance in forms of protest or means of mobilization is visible, to declare the twentieth-century movements as continuations of the nineteenth-century tradition and to deny that "élites" could have had anything to do with them.[22] On the contrary, if the resemblance is not striking or is muted, then he or his colleagues hasten

Transmission, discusses the issue of mobilization and Chapter 6, the last one, titled "Territoriality", is about how the physical limits of rebellions are defined by ethnicity and geographical identity, etc. Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*.

[19] This is in contrast to Wolf who studies his six cases as separate wholes and then makes his generalizations. See Wolf, *Peasant Wars*.

[20] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, pp. 6–8.

[21] *Ibid*., p. 10.

[22] *Ibid*., pp. 331, 334–35, and Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies I*, pp. 3–4.

to label them as "élite" movements which curbed popular militancy, and attribute their popular support to the subalterns' ability to resist the élite's attempt at demobilization.[23]

These conclusions, I would argue, are inherent in the method adopted for analysis. Once the "aspects" of ideology, of causes, of aims, of leadership, that is, aspects that are difficult to isolate or delink from their historical context, are omitted from the paradigm and thereby from the comparison and the analysis, the crucial differences in these "aspects" between nineteenth and twentieth century popular resistance are automatically missed. If one were to follow this method for analysing Chinese peasant resistance, one could easily declare that the communist mobilization of the peasantry in the twentieth-century was really nothing but a continuation of the centuries-old Chinese tradition of peasant resistance. Such a conclusion becomes easy if one does not ask why this time the same forms of resistance resulted in the establishment of a different kind of social system; these kinds of conclusions become easy, and even inevitable, if the "aspects" one is studying are not located concretely within time and space. Therefore, it seems to us that even if the "subalternist" historians appear to recognize some of the limitations of the traditional consciousness of the peasantry and appear to concede the need for a revolutionary party or for "working class" leadership, this remains a purely formal exercise that does not really permeate their concrete analysis. Guha's critique of traditional peasant resistance in his book is essentially limited to the following two statements: "...ethnicity was no substitute for class consciousness in uniting the people against colonialism" and: "Territoriality was not indeed the stuff with which to build a revolutionary party...." These statements are nowhere elaborated or discussed.[24]

The "subaltern" school of historians are, in fact, rather allergic to any suggestion of élite mobilization—including by Communists. They even accuse Marxist historiography of an "elitist" bias[25] and of harbouring a desire to appropriate the peasants autonomous activity as part of the history of the left.[26] In Ranajit Guha's words, "this excludes the rebel as the conscious

[23] See Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", p. 6; Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, pp. 395–96; Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 205, 218; Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 183 and Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 46.
[24] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, pp. 331–32.
[25] Sarkar, for example, states that: "Finally, and above all, my basic quarrel with conventional nationalist, communalist, Cambridge and even some Marxist historiography is that despite all their mutual opposition, they have tended to share a common elitist approach". Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 11.
[26] Commenting on left historiography of the peasantry, Guha writes: "The purpose of such tertiary discourse (of the left) is quite clearly to try and retrieve the history of insurgency from that continuum which is designed to assimilate every jacquerie to 'England's Work in India' and arrange it along the alternative axis of a protracted campaign for freedom and

subject of his own history".[27] The "subalternists" are unwilling, however, to state unambiguously, at the theoretical level, the case for the autonomous revolutionariness of the peasants and to assert that even the Communist revolutionaries were either redundant or unwelcome "élite" interlopers. Nevertheless, they often suggest that even Communists have taken, or at least left or Marxist historians have given them, credit for movements that were essentially a continuation of the peasantry's own independent tradition of militancy. In fact, the history of the two most powerful Communist-led movements in India, Tebhaga and Telengana, is cited by Guha as an example of this appropriation of the history of the peasant by the history of socialism.[28]

However, since this school of historians has yet to produce any detailed research on communist-led movements, it is not possible to substantiate the observation made here with any more specific references to what they say about communist mobilization of the peasantry, but the manner of their handling of all non-communist mass mobilization suggests that the observation is not unfair. Their entire emphasis is on establishing the existence of an "autonomous", "pure" domain of "subaltern" politics which moves with its own dynamic and momentum, on occasion erupting into rebellion, as, for instance, in 1919 (Rowlatt Satyagraha), 1942 (Quit India Movement) and 1946 (the post-war popular upsurge).[29] This "domain" has little to do with the "élite" domain of nationalist politics and if on occasion the "élite" domain does impinge on the "subaltern" domain, its influence is necessarily negative.[30] Therefore, "élite" influence is either non-existent or, if visible, negative. Its negative nature is axiomatic, it does not have to be proved. This is because the "subaltern" critique of non-communist mass mobilization is not of the latter's ideological framework but rests on the basis that the social origins of the personnel involved in the task of mobilization are "élite" or that the claim of mobilization is itself a myth. Therefore, since the social or class origins of the communist leadership could hardly be differentiated from those of non-communist nationalists, communist mass mobilization would also have to be declared either as negative in its impact or as a myth, if and when such mobilization is subjected to "subaltern" scrutiny. Of course, the "myth" part of this line of approach has already been suggested by scattered references to the histories of Tebhaga,

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socialism. However, as with colonialist historiography, this, too, amounts to an act of appropriation...." Guha, "The prose of counter–insurgency", p. 33.

[27] Guha, *Ibid.*, p. 33. Also see Arnold, "*Rebellious Hillmen*", p. 89.

[28] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, p. 334.

[29] *Ibid.*, pp. 331, 334, and Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", p. 3.

[30] See Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, pp. 205, 217; and Sarkar, *Modern India*, p. 183.

Telengana, the popular struggles of 1946, etc., as instances of "appropriation" by "élite" historiography.

Further, the logic of the position taken by the "subaltern" approach is to treat all "outsiders" as some kind of interlopers or trespassers on the reserved territory of the peasantry. They do not accept that being an "outsider" need not automatically make anyone anti-peasant or anti-subaltern or "élite", and that one would have to concretely examine the ideological and political perspective that is brought in by the outsider and the role performed by the outsider's activity among the peasantry. The "subalternists" do not stop to ask these questions—whether the ideology with which the outsider mobilizes the peasantry is imperialist or nationalist, feudal or "peasantist", bourgeois or socialist, democratic or totalitarian or whether the intervention is advancing the peasantry's level of organizational and ideological preparedness for struggle. The outsider, because he is an outsider, must belong to the camp of the "élite", the "villains", and his entry into the camp of the "heroes", the subalterns, can only be regarded with suspicion. The "heroes", already endowed with their own "autonomous" tradition of militancy and revolutionariness, could not possibly have anything to learn from the "outsider" and "his" world.

Social Origins of Leadership: The Problem of Evidence

So absolute is the tyranny of theory, so blind the faith in their own historical method, that the subalternists tend to even ignore their own empirical evidence on the social origins of the leadership of peasant and tribal rebellions and resistance. The historical evidence, not unexpectedly, is overwhelmingly that of leadership being provided by what in "subaltern" terminology would be classified as "élite" elements. But nowhere in these studies of the history and experience of subaltern classes does one find an attempt being made to recognize and analyse what is obviously a very important aspect of subaltern life: the failure, except occasionally, to throw up leadership from among the "subalterns" themselves.

For example, David Arnold, one of the historians who writes under the "subaltern" banner, in his account of the Gudem-Rampa tribal uprisings in Andhra stretching over almost a century (1839–1924), comes up with the following evidence. The first phase of revolts or *fituris*, from 1839–62, he tells us, were basically risings of the *muttadars* or tribal élites and "there is little evidence extant of popular involvement in their struggles". So in the first phase, the resistance was confined to the "élite", the subalterns did not even participate. In the second phase, which lasted from 1879 to 1916, the

first revolt "was led by *muttadars* and headmen", the second, in 1886, was led by "Jani Karkari, a dispossessed landholder and supported by other discontented hillmen and their priests". The revolt in 1891 was led by a zamindar's son, and the one in 1915–16 had the sympathies of at least one *muttadar*, Virayya Dora. The last revolt, the famous *fituri* of 1922–24, was, as is well-known, led by Alluri Sita Ram Raju, "an outsider from the plains", a "Telugu Kshatriya", whose father was "a travelling photographer" and "uncle (by the time of the rising) a deputy collector". He had been "on a pilgrimage to Nasik in Maharashtra" in 1921, at the time of the Non-Cooperation Movement and "perhaps in the course of this journey... [had come] into contact with the Gandhian movement", because he "began to preach temperance..., he adopted *khadi* and was said to speak highly of Gandhi...." Besides him, it was "*ex-muttadars*, dispossessed landholders and outlaws [who] once again constituted an important leadership element...." Even when "in some cases the initiative for revolt came from subaltern hillmen", it seems that, according to Arnold, instead of themselves assuming the leadership, they "forced leadership upon the reluctant *muttadars*".[31] One waits in vain, however, for Arnold to assess the implications of this evidence for his own theory.[32]

Similarly, one finds that in almost all the movements "from below" discussed by Sumit Sarkar in *Modern India*, leadership is provided by ostensibly "élite" elements. The uprising in Maharashtra in 1879 was led by Vasudeo Balvant Phadke, "a Chitpavan Brahman and a Commissariat Department clerk who had some English education, [and] seems to have been influenced by Ranade's lectures on drain of wealth". The Deccan Riots of 1875 were an example of a "type of rural protest ... deriving its leadership and much of its support from relatively better-off sections of the peasantry". "The three principal leaders of the (Pabna) agrarian league... [were] the petty landholder Ishan Chandra Roy, the village headman Shambhu Pal (both caste Hindus), and the Muslim Jotedar Khoodi Mollah". The no-revenue movements between 1885 and 1905 were characterized by the "leadership of local notables". One such movement in Assam in 1893–94 was "led by the rural élite". In Maharashtra in 1896–97, "the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha, which had been recently captured by Tilak, sent out agents into the countryside" to encourage peasants to resist payment of revenue in a period of famine. "After the famine of 1899–1900, no-revenue combinations allegedly led by rich peasants and moneylenders were reported from Surat, Nasik, Kheda and Ahmedabad districts, though the Poona Sarvajanik Sabha had by then become quite inactive". The only clear example of

[31] All the quotes are from Arnold, "*Rebellious Hillmen*", pp. 101, 119–20, 124, 134–50.

[32] For a critique of Arnold's position as well as for a fuller discussion of this rebellion, see Murali Atlury, "Alluri Sitaram Raju and the Manyam Rebellion of 1922–24", *Social Scientist*, 12, 4, April 1984, especially, pp. 31–33.

emergence of leadership "from below" is that of Birsa Munda, (who led a revolt of the Munda tribal people in the region south of Ranchi in 1899–1900) who was the son of a sharecropper, though even he, we are told, had received some education from missionaries. Even among caste movements, low caste movements were less in evidence than the "more effective caste movements... [which] tended to be connected with intermediate ranks, below the twice-born and above the untouchables and usually included considerable landed or rich peasant elements with the capacity to produce urban educated groups". The peasant movements in Mewar were led by a *sadhu*, Sitaram Das, in 1913, an ex-revolutionary terrorist, Vijay Singh Pathik and Manik Lal Verma, a state official, from 1916 onwards. The Bhils were organized by Motilal Tejawat, an Udaipur spice merchant who claimed to be Gandhi's emissary. In Marwar, a no-revenue campaign was organized by Jai Narayan Vyas. The peasant movement in Darbhanga in 1919–20 was led by Swami Vidyanand, the "son of a prosperous occupancy tenant with 30 bighas in Saran", who was "inspired by Gandhi's Champaran movement and who often claimed to be a disciple of Gandhi".[33]

However, despite this overwhelming evidence, Sumit Sarkar, too, fails to address himself seriously to this critical aspect of subaltern resistance — why could they not throw up leaders? That, unlike many others of the same persuasion, he is aware of the problem is evident from his discussion of the reasons for Gandhi's continuing hold on the peasant masses. The explanation he offers is that "a Gandhi-type leadership with strong religious overtones was something like a historical necessity in this period" and that "the peasants still needed to be represented by a saviour from above".[34] While this may be accepted as a serious effort to explain a certain type of leadership—the Gandhian type of leadership in which he includes Swami Vidyanand, Baba Ramachandra, Alluri Sita Ram Raju and the like, it still leaves out of its ambit the entire range of leadership provided, according to Sarkar's own evidence, by non-religious "élites" like moneylenders, *jotedars*, rich peasants, government officials, ex-terrorists and non-Gandhian urban political workers. Further, Sarkar does make a somewhat half-hearted attempt to demarcate himself from the main body of the subaltern approach, as is apparent from his following statement: "the peasants still needed a saviour from above—a crucial limitation which is perhaps at times underestimated by some recent scholars who, reacting against élite historiography, tend to somewhat romanticize the spontaneous revolutionary potential of the rural masses."[35] This statement, however, remains only

[33] All the quotes are from Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 43–58, 155, 201.
[34] *Ibid.*, p. 182.
[35] *Ibid.*

that—an attempt at demarcation—rather than becoming a point of departure for a comprehensive analysis of the implications of this "crucial limitation" for the whole subaltern theory of popular consciousness and resistance.

Gyanendra Pandey, too, is hardly concerned that in his area of study in Awadh in the UP[36] one wing of the Kisan Sabha Movement that emerged in the years 1918–21 was clearly led by the urban liberal nationalists and that even the grass-roots wing had at its head Baba Ramachandra, who could hardly be considered a typical Awadhi peasant: a Brahmin from Maharashtra, he had worked for several years in Fiji as an indentured labourer, then wandered into the UP, become a *sadhu* and settled down in Awadh where he counted many zamindars among his friends.[37] Baba Ramachandra's range of experience and exposure to the world was certainly far removed from that of an ordinary peasant of Awadh and his consciousness or ideology can hardly be considered representative of the "autonomous" or "pure" consciousness of the "subaltern" peasants he led. Further, significantly enough, there was hardly any evidence of overt "spontaneous" resistance in Awadh to taluqdars, zamindars or the government in the long years between the suppression of the revolt of 1857 and the movement that emerged from 1918 onwards, a period of time in which no "outside" or "élite" leaders approached the peasants. And again, Pandey notes this feature,[38] but fails to see its implications for "subaltern" theory. Instead, he prefers to buttress the claims of "autonomous" subaltern consciousness by highlighting the one stray example of "subaltern leadership"—Madari Pasi, the low-caste leader of the Eka Movement that swept parts of Awadh in the first quarter of 1922. The "minor" problem posed by lack of evidence about Madari Pasi is dismissed by him as an inevitable product of the kind of research conducted by "élite" practitioners of the art such as Majid Siddiqi and he is sanguine in his faith that further effort, perhaps on his next visit to the UP, is bound to unearth the necessary historical material.[39]

Similarly, the glaring and persistent inability of the "subaltern" peasants of north Bihar to throw up leadership from within their own ranks and the fact that the leadership of all the peasant movements studied by him comprised small zamindari and rich peasant elements does not prompt Stephen Henningham to even try to qualify, if not question, the notion of subaltern "autonomy". On the contrary, he makes what one can only describe as a rather brave or bravado attempt to assert subaltern "autonomy" by arbitrarily splitting the peasant upsurge that was part of the Quit India

[36] See Pandey, "*Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism*".
[37] See Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India*, p. 104.
[38] See Pandey, *The Ascendancy of the Congress*, p. 161.
[39] Pandey, "*Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism*", pp. 190–91.

Movement of 1942 into "two interacting insurgencies".[40] The lack of supportive evidence, as in the case of Pandey, is no deterrent: he is unconcerned that the "subalterns", or lower-caste peasants in this case, attacked the same targets—the various symbols of government authority—as the "élite" or that the leadership continued to remain in "élite" hands. For him, simply the fact that the poorer, lower-caste elements *were more prominent* in the later phase of the uprising is enough proof of their "autonomy"! The other elements of the "proof" of subaltern "autonomy"—the intrusion of religious consciousness and the raising of the slogan of "Inqilab Zindabad" are even more curious. Religious consciousness was hardly the preserve of the lower castes and the poor in rural India and the slogan of "Inquilab Zindabad" (long live the revolution) had long been incorporated, unknown to Henningham, into the armoury of the "élite" national movement.[41]

In fact, so great is the weight of evidence on this feature of leadership of peasant resistance in nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial India that the lack of concern with its implications becomes particularly significant. Apart from the evidence cited here from the works of "subaltern" historians, one can list any number of instances from other studies to make the point. It is almost a truism, for example, that the Revolt of 1857, which was undoubtedly the most widespread peasant revolt of the nineteenth century, was led by dispossessed rulers, *taluqdars* and *zamindars*.[42] In the famous Indigo Revolt or Blue Mutiny of 1859, the leadership came from zamindars or zamindari-based intellectuals, moneylenders, substantial peasants, headmen of villages, Calcutta-educated *mukhtars* or attorneys and journalists and missionaries.[43] In Champaran in 1917, besides Gandhi, it was the rich peasants and local moneylenders like Raj Kumar Shukul, Sant Raut and Khendar Prasad Rai and traders, village *mukhtars*, school teachers, and members of the urban intelligentsia like Rajendra Prasad who provided the leadership.[44] In Gujarat, in Kheda and Bardoli, the leadership

[40] While the essential constituents of the argument are present in his monograph (Henningham, *Peasant Movements in Colonial India. North Bihar, 1917–42,* Canberra, 1982), for the elaboration and full "subaltern" touch, see his article in the "subaltern" volume (Henningham, "Quit India in Bihar and Eastern United Provinces").

[41] It is quite significant that neither of the scholars who have studied the Quit India Movement in the same region in much greater depth have found themselves in agreement with Henningham's characterization of the nature of the movement. See Mitra, "*Political Mobilization and the Nationalist Movement*", Singha, "*Aspects of the Quit India Movement*" and Misra, *Quit India Movement in Ballia.*

[42] See Rudrangshu Mukherjee, *Awadh in Revolt 1857–1858: A Study of Popular Resistance*, Delhi, 1984 and Eric Stokes, *The Peasant and the Raj: Studies in Agrarian Society and Peasant Rebellion in Colonial India*, Delhi, 1978.

[43] See Blair Kling, *The Blue Mutiny: The Indigo Disturbances in Bengal, 1859–1862*, Philadelphia, 1966, pp. 84–86.

[44] See J. Pouchepadass, "Local Leaders and the Intelligentsia in the Champaran Satyagraha (1917): A Study in Peasant Mobilization", in *Contributions to Indian Sociology*, New Series, 8, 1978, pp. 46–50; and Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 183–84.

of the peasant movements came from the upper castes such as Patidars and Brahmins and members of the urban intelligentsia.[45] Again, it was the non-tribal, urban leadership of the Kisan Sabha that led the tribal Varlis of Maharashtra in their militant struggles in the mid-1940s.[46] The Communist leadership of the Telengana Movement of 1946–51, which perhaps achieved the greatest mobilization of the poor peasantry among contemporary peasant struggles, also came, especially in the early stages, primarily from well-to-do peasant and landlord backgrounds.[47] In the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal in 1946–47, the initiative was clearly taken by the leaders of the Communist Party and the Kisan Sabha who came either from the urban middle class or from well-to-do rural families and they continued to provide the major part of the leadership.[48] In the Kisan Sabha Movement that developed in various parts of the country in the 1930s and 1940s, the leadership again was primarily in the hands of the radicalized sections of the urban intelligentsia and the upper layers of rural society such as small landlords and well-to-do peasants; and this was as true for Punjab and Bihar as it was for Bengal or Malabar or coastal Andhra.

In Punjab, too, the social origins of the leaders were similarly diverse—hardly any of them were "pure" peasants without exposure to the wider world. Most of them had had some education and many were even college-educated. In fact, the striking feature of the peasant leadership in Punjab is that the initial hard core was formed by members of the Ghadar—later Kirti—Party, many of whom had become revolutionaries abroad and some of whom had received training in Moscow. Thus, they were not only exposed to the world outside the village, in India, but to the whole wide world. Even those who had not themselves travelled abroad, often had brothers or uncles or fathers or neighbours who were or had been abroad and were thus conversant with the world outside and its ways. Again, the large recruitment for the army from among the peasants also meant that returning soldiers, many of whom had seen action in various theatres in different parts of the world in the First World War, and even been prisoners of war, brought with them stories of far-away lands and became the carriers of new ideas.

[45] See Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat: Kheda District*, *1917–1934,* Delhi, 1981 and Shirin Mehta, *The Peasantry and Nationalism.*

[46] See S.V. Parulekar, "The Liberation Movement Among the Varlis", in Desai, ed., *Peasant Struggles in India*.

[47] This feature also emerged clearly in interviews with roughly hundred participants of the Telengana struggle including Ravi Narayan Reddy, D.V. Rao, Giri Prasad, Bhimareddy Narsimhareddy, Dharma Bhiksham, Malla Swarajyam and C. Tirumal Rao conducted by and my colleagues in 1984 as part of the project on the history of the Indian National Movement. Barry Pavier, *Telengana Movement*, also comes to a similar conclusion.

[48] See Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*.

It is indeed difficult to exaggerate the contribution of the Ghadar/Kirti stream to the leadership of peasant protest in Punjab. Most of the over 200 Ghadar Party leaders who were sentenced to long periods of imprisonment in various conspiracy cases in 1914–15 (that is, those who were not among the 40 who were hanged),[49] on their release in the 1930s came straight into the peasant movement. Among them were the Ghadri Babas Sohan Singh Bhakna, Jwala Singh, Kesar Singh, Rur Singh Chuharchak, Harnam Singh Tundilat, Sher Singh Wain Puin and Harnam Singh Gujarwala. Santokh Singh had been sent in 1925 to Punjab from the Kabul centre of the Ghadar Party and he founded the *Kirti*, which remained the major organ of the left and peasant movement. From 1930, began the arrival of a new wave of Ghadar Party activists, those who had been sent from various places abroad for training in Moscow in the University of Toilers of the East after the Ghadar Party had undergone an ideological transformation and accepted Marxism as its guiding ideology, along with nationalism, which they retained. In all, it seems, 77 of these men arrived in India in the 1930s, of whom all but three were from Punjab, and of these the vast majority went to work in the villages of Punjab. Among them were some of the most committed and well-loved leaders of the Punjab peasants—Bhagat Singh Bilga, Teja Singh Swatantar, Bujha Singh, Iqbal Singh Hundal, Bachan Singh Gholia, Achhar Singh Chhina, Wasdev Singh, Naina Singh Dhoot and Chanan Singh.[50] They were nearly all of peasant origin, some from families with more land and others from those with less, but the route through which they became leaders of the peasants was so circuitous—emigration abroad, attraction towards the intensely nationalist Ghadar Party and/or towards Marxism, usually training in Moscow, etc.—that it ensured that they did not fit the category of "leaders from below" or of leaders thrown up by the peasant movement. Their peasant origins were certainly of help in their being able to more easily mingle with peasants, in acquiring strong bases in their own villages and in surrounding areas, but their heads were full of ideas picked up from all over the world, and, in that sense, they too were "outsiders" with "outside" ideologies.

Let it be thought that the Punjab case is an exception to the general rule because of this special infusion of "foreign" influence via returning emigrants, I cite at some length the data gathered mostly from my interviews with men and women, many of whom were no more than local-level activists in the 1930 and 1940s, though some of them later emerged as provincial and even national level leaders, and none of whom, except one, had taken the Ghadar/Kirti/Moscow route. Sohan Singh Narangabadi, for example, of Amritsar district, who became a peasant activist in the 1930s, came from a family of self-cultivating well-to-do peasants who owned 70 bighas

[49] See Chapter 1.

[50] See Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, pp. 163–66 and 197–99.

(roughly 30 acres) of land in Amritsar and two squares (or roughly 50 acres) of land in Lyallpur. During the Depression, though, they had difficulty paying the land revenue and Sohan Singh's father had even been to the lock-up a couple of times because of his inability to pay the revenue and they had fallen into debt. He was educated upto the matriculation level or high school. Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, also drawn into politics in the 1930s, came from a fairly similar background, with a family-holding of 80 bighas in village Shahbazpur in Amritsar District. His father and brother were in the army and he too was educated.

Joginder Singh Chhina, from Chhina Village in Amritsar District that was made famous by the Harsa Chhina Morcha and by the well-known leader Achhar Singh Chhina, who was a close relative, was one of the chief accused in the Fatehwal case (see Chapter 5). His family owned 40–50 acres of land and his father was employed as an overseer. Jagbir Singh Chhina, a close relative of Joginder Singh Chhina and a nephew of Achhar Singh Chhina, who also became an active political worker in the late 1930s, came from a family that owned roughly 30 acres of land in Chhina Village and, on his own testimony, were considered quite well-to-do. Dalip Singh Tapiala, who was also active since the mid-1930s and became an important provincial-level Communist leader in later years, came from a family who traced their ancestry to a commander in Ranjit Singh's army. The family had also received grants of land and revenue assignments from the British for rendering help against the rebels of 1857, though due to what he described as a feudal style of life, they had fallen into debt and his father had to join the army. He had been brought up by his uncle and was also educated.

Dalip Singh Jauhal, another educated man, came from a very well-to-do landowning family of Amritsar District, which had many members in government service and in the army. He, too, became an important Communist leader in later years. Ram Singh Majitha, also of Amritsar District, came from a well-to-do peasant family, was a matriculate and had gone to Amritsar City for training in a technical institute when the attraction of the Civil Disobedience Movement lured him into a political life. Jagjit Singh Anand, a student leader who was also active among peasants, was the son of a headmaster of the Sikh High School in Tarn Taran who had led the Akali Movement for the liberation of the *gurdwara* in the town. The family was starving when Jagjit Singh's father was in jail so he had to give up politics and remained a teacher.

Bhagat Singh Bilga, originally from a family of *nambardars* in Bilga Village, forsook a college education to go to Argentina to work and pay off the family debt but was caught up in the Ghadar Party network and came back to India via Moscow in the mid-1930s. Ujagar Singh Bilga, one of the earliest grass-roots level peasant organizers in the province, who was

originally a Congressman, then moved close in the 1930s to the left and was in his later years a major Sarvodaya leader in Punjab, also came from a well-to-do family. As a young man, he had even joined the army under the inspiration of the Ghadar Party to create disaffection among the soldiers. Master Hari Singh, who was elected a member of the Punjab Legislative Assembly in 1937 from Hoshiarpur, had first risen to prominence as a leader of the peasant agitation in the state of Kapurthala in 1935. He was college-educated and the head master of a school.

Chain Singh Chain, later an important Communist leader of the province, but in the 1930s a local-level activist of Jullundur District, came from a family that owned roughly 10 acres of land and were also petty money-lenders. G.S. Randhawa, another peasant activist from Jullundur, who was also later active in the *Muzara* Movement in Patiala when it was led by the Lal Communist party in the late 1940s and early 1950s and an important provincial-level Communist leader afterwards, was, in his own words, the son of "a middle peasant owning five acres of land". He was educated till the middle-school level but had to give up his education because of the fall in family income during the Depression. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, at present the General Secretary of the CPI(M) and who jumped into politics when still in school, was born into a well-to-do family that owned 24 acres of land. However, his grandfather disinherited his father and gave him just 2 acres of land when the latter joined the national movement and subsequently his father had to leave politics and go abroad to make a living.

From Patiala, we have the following examples: Dharam Singh Fakkar, an educated man, whose family, though *muzaras* or tenants, were quite well-to-do. Giani Bachan Singh, also from a *muzara* background, who was one of the leaders of the "armed squad", was a matriculate and had qualified for the air force. Hari Singh, another *muzara* activist, was the only other educated boy in Bachan Singh's village. Kehar Singh, another member of the "armed squad", was an ex-army man. Harnam Singh Dharamgarh, an important leader of the *Muzara* Movement, was also an ex-army man who had joined a mutiny in Egypt. And Jagir Singh Joga, one of the foremost leaders of the movement in Patiala, and later an important provincial level leader, who began his political life in the Non-Cooperation Movement in 1921, also came from a well-to-do peasant family and was educated up to the school level.

The following are examples from other parts of the province: Karam Singh Mann, an important provincial-level leader of the CPI in the 1930s, who also played a considerable role in the peasant movement, hailed from a family that owned four squares (roughly 100 acres) of land in Lyallpur District. He went to England to become a barrister, but also became a communist. Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, another highly educated leader, but one who came to politics via the student movement of the late 1930s, had a family

holding of 6–7 squares (150–180 acres) of land in Lyallpur. Chhajju Mal Vaid, who was a close associate of Teja Singh Swatantar and also played an active role in the Lal Communist Party, was a college graduate and an office employee in the Dhariwal Mills before he gravitated to the communist movement.

The two examples we have of women who were active organizers in the peasant movement in the 1940s are of Sushila Chain, who was the daughter of a prosperous contractor in the town of Pathankot, a Congressman and an Arya Samaji, who wanted his daughter to become a "leader", and of Shakuntala Sharda Rishi, the daughter of an inspector of schools who gave up his job to work for the Arya Samaj. As is obvious, they were, both of them, of urban background and educated.

The following are the only examples we have of peasant activists who came from poor families with either little or no land. Ruldu Khan, who later became a major Communist leader of agricultural labour in Punjab, hailed from a family of *telis*, a low caste of oil-pressers, whose main occupations were repairing utensils and agricultural labour. But Ruldu Khan had been sent to school and even studied upto the tenth class, though he had to work as an agricultural labourer to support himself during that period. Wadhawa Ram, another remarkable man who became a major leader of the tenants of the canal colonies, hailed from a family of poor tenants of the Kamboh caste—a caste considered lower than the Jats but not a traditionally landless caste. However, he, too, had completed his matriculation and even found employment as a *patwari*, a low level revenue official—a position which he resigned to join the tenants' struggle. Balwant Singh Azad, an activist of the Amritsar District, came from a caste much lower down in the hierarchy than Wadhawa Ram. He was a *Dahi Khatri*–an artisan caste. His father was a petty shopkeeper, had no land, but managed to send his son to school. Balwant Singh completed his school and a teacher's training course and became a teacher—only to lose his job because he was arrested in the Civil Disobedience Movement! The only example we have of a completely illiterate peasant activist is of Jwala Singh Barapind, of Jullundur District, whose family owned only 2 acres. He remained a grass-roots level activist all his life—first as a Communist and later as a Congressman.

There were others as well, from wholly urban background, like Munshi Ahmed Din, a favourite orator at peasant conferences, who belonged to the Congress Socialist Party, Professor Brij Narain, who made the peasants' cause his own and was certainly an intellectual, if not a mass leader of the peasants, B.P.L. Bedi, another Congress Socialist, Kedar Nath Sharma, Principal Chhabil Das and the young men of the NJBS. In Haryana, there were Pandit Neki Ram Sharma and Sri Ram Sharma, both Brahmins, who easily mixed with Jat and non-Jat Haryanvi peasants and also M.L. Vats. Jaswant Singh Kairon, who became a Communist and his brother, Pratap

Singh Kairon, both of whom had considerable influence among peasants, were from a big landowning family and had been educated abroad. The examples are endless. In the 1940s, when the Communists tried to penetrate into the dark recesses of landlord-ridden western Punjab, it was with the aid of the young Communist sons of the big Muslim Unionist landlords, Mazhar Ali and Mahmud Ali.

Nor is the Indian case by any means unique and, in fact, studies of peasant resistance in other peasant-based societies have also emphasized this feature. For example, Chesneaux freely recognizes that in pre-modern China, which had a tradition of peasant rebellion that was among the strongest anywhere and certainly stronger than the Indian one, the leadership of peasant rebellions "often came from other social strata". These included "elements de-classe from the intelligentsia", "literati who failed the examinations, nonconformist or dissident intellectuals, Taoist or Buddhist monks", "discontented members of the ruling class, 'black sheep' of respectable families", "ruined artisans", "stevedores, boatmen, pedlars or labourers". And the reasons he advances for this phenomenon also make clear that *it was their position as outsiders*, or as those who had contact with the outside world, that was critical in giving them the ability to perform the leadership role: "They enjoyed a mobility which the day-to-day work in the fields and the inexorable demands of the seasons denied to the peasants; they travelled far and carried news, rebellious slogans or forbidden writings; their mental horizon was wider and their critique of society more radical, and their participation in peasant revolts helped to make them less localized".[51]

Similarly, Eric Wolf discusses the issue of the leadership of the twentieth-century peasant wars that he studies without any embarrassment about its non-peasant or non-rural, "outsider" component.[52] The important social groups, from which the new leadership emerges to replace the traditional leadership that is unable to answer to the peasants' new needs, are identified as "petty officials of the state bureaucracy, the professionals, the school-teachers". And then the reasons for this are sought in their characteristic features. The first of these is identified as the possession of "skills [that are]... much more likely to have been learned from the West or from western type educational institutions... and [that] are based on literacy, of specialized acquaintance with a corpus of literature which departs from the traditions of the country and suggests new alternatives.... They operate in a communication field vastly larger than that of the past, and full of new learning which suggests powerful visions not dreamed of in the inherited ideology". Their acceptance as leaders, despite their being carriers of non-traditional ideas, is linked to their being literate. "Within the

[51] Chesneaux, *Peasant Revolts in China*, pp. 16, 70.

[52] The quotes in this and the next paragraph are from Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, pp. 287–89.

traditional society literacy was in most cases a hallmark of high status. The new literati partake of the reflected glory of this traditional evaluation of literacy...."

The second characteristic pinpointed by Wolf is that the members of these groups become increasingly aware of "the very real limitation on their power" to do anything for the problems that plague their society, of which they become conscious both through their own existential predicaments about the insecurity and insufficiency of their means of livelihood as well as through those of their clients. They "soon become aware that they are limited to coping with symptoms, but do not have a handle on the conditions which produce these symptoms". He goes on to say that "for such 'marginal men' political movements often provide a 'home', of which they are otherwise deprived by their own skill, their social positions, and their divorce from traditional sources of power". He also approvingly cites a passage from Shils:[53]

> Even though he seeks and seems actually to break away from the authority of the powerful traditions in which he was brought up, the intellectual of underdeveloped countries, still more than his confrere in the more advanced countries, retains the need for incorporation into some self-transcending, authoritative entity. Indeed, the greater his struggle for emancipation from the traditional collectivity, the greater his need for incorporation into a new, alternative collectivity. *Intense politicization meets this need.* (emphasis added).

Wolf then concludes: "What they [the intellectuals] need is a constituency; and that constituency is ultimately provided by the industrial workers and dissatisfied peasants whom the market created, but for whom society made no adequate social provision. In all of our six cases we witness such a fusion between the 'rootless' intellectuals and their rural supporters".

The long citations from Wolf and from Chesneaux are included here with a purpose: to emphasize the need for initiating analysis on similar lines in the Indian case. Most scholars of the Indian peasantry and even those who, unlike the "subalterns", have nothing to be wary about, have shied away from discussing the reasons for the particular social origins of the leadership. In fact, even other issues pertaining to the issue of leadership, such as the question of its necessity, its specific role, its relationship with the people, the relationship between spontaneity and organization in a movement and the like, have been left untouched by most writers. I am not suggesting, therefore, that we transfer the analysis of either Wolf or

[53] Edward Shils, "The Intellectuals in the Political Development of the New States", in John H. Kautsky, ed., *Political Change in Underdeveloped Countries*, New York and London, p. 205, cited in Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, p. 289.

Chesneaux or of any other "outside" expert wholesale to the Indian situation. On the contrary, I think we need to look much more intimately at our own specificities, which are products of our different colonial situation as well as of our own cultural environment, though the insights offered by all manner of experts of other societies will be an invaluable aid.

I do believe, for example, that the insight offered by Wolf into the reasons for the acceptance of the new kind of leaders by the peasantry being linked to their literate, or educated status, for which there is a great value in traditional societies, is a valuable one for understanding the Indian experience. In all the cases I cited here from Punjab, except one, the political workers and leaders were literate, and in many cases were highly educated as well by contemporary standards, thus giving them, as Wolf says, an access to new ideas derived from non-traditional sources. The significance of this insight needs, I think, to be explored much more thoroughly. Similarly, his other insights about the powerlessness of the intellectuals in the given structure, their distance from traditional moorings and yet the strong need to belong to a collectivity, which lead to their intense commitment to political movements are also extremely relevant for our analysis. The Indian leaders of the anti-imperialist and peasant movements did indeed reflect such an intense commitment to their cause and were also often drawn from the social groups identified by Wolf. However, though there were variations caused by the specificity of the situation, as in Punjab by the experience of alienation and racial discrimination in their host countries that prompted many emigrants of peasant origin to return home to fight for the liberation of their people, or by the large Punjabi presence in the Indian army, which gave a wide exposure to many peasant soldiers who brought new visions of the world back with them into their homes and a sense of self-respect, which sometimes pushed them into assuming positions of leadership in protest movements, despite the loyalist ideology ingrained in them assiduously by their British officers. In this context, Chesneaux's analysis of the role played in even traditional peasant protest in China by the more mobile elements of rural society, who had contact with the outside world and were less bound down by the routine of cultivation, as carriers of radical new ideas, is extremely illuminating. In Punjab, certainly, the role played by the "mobile men" was critical in opening up new vistas of possibilities before the peasants. The visions of the future to which the Punjab peasants were usually treated by their leaders were derived, as stated earlier, from the imprint on their minds of the two countries they were most familiar with—the Soviet Union and the United States. The "foreign-returned" emigrants had no need to offer a millenarian vision—they had seen the millennium with their own eyes, it existed, it only had to be reached.

As I said earlier, I give the examples of Wolf and Chesneaux, from among many possible examples, only to indicate the possibilities that exist of following up on some leads provided by the analysis of societies other than our own. Equally, or even more, I think we need to incorporate into our analysis the collective wisdom of the leaders and organizers of our peasantry—a wisdom gained through long years of contact with real life peasants, their fears, their hopes, their shortcomings and their strengths and also often from a continuous testing of received, usually radical, theory at the whetstone of practice. This wisdom can be gained from their own writings, whenever they are available, or from oral testimony, as I have tried to do to some extent in this work, as well as from their practice itself, which, after all, is distilled wisdom.[54]

To provide just a flavour of the variety of insights that are available from this source, I give next a few, essentially random, examples of the nuggets of wisdom that emerged on the issue of leadership in the course of interviews with some of the participant-organizers of the peasant movement in Punjab. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, who is at present, as mentioned earlier, the general secretary of the largest communist party in India, said that one of the consequences of the People's War line followed by the Communist Party from 1942 to 1945, and which led to its remaining aloof from the Quit India Movement, was that some Congress leaders who had gravitated towards the left in Kangra District went back to the Congress. The loss of leaders, especially in an area where Communists had little independent hold of their own but were trying hard to create a peasant base, was an obvious setback, he said. He then proceeded, however, to make what I think is an extremely insightful comment: "It takes a long time to throw up a new leadership in an area of general peasant movement. However, in an area of sharp class struggle, as in working class or tenants, in two or three years a new leadership can come up". In other words, if the existing leadership deserts, may be because of wrong policies, or is lost, through repression or whatever, it is an extremely difficult job to generate a new line of leadership in an area where there are no sharp class divisions, as between tenants and landlords. With this insight, one can better grasp the terrible loss inflicted by the decimation of the Ghadar Party leadership in 1914–15 as well as the heavy toll taken by continuous repression in the 1920s and 1930s and early 1940s when any number of leaders of the peasants were physically prevented from performing their designated roles. One can also better appreciate the difficulties faced by the Punjab leadership and movement in comparison with their comrades in provinces where

[54] Just as in the case of Gandhiji, it is very often his actual political practice that has to be analysed to grasp his ideas. Unlike Jawaharlal Nehru, for example, who constantly engaged in a public intellectual debate with himself and with others, Gandhiji often did not theorize his practice. See Chandra, *Indian National Movement*, pp. 16–17.

Congress ministries came to power in 1937, as well as better grasp the disruption of the peasant movement by the Partition in 1947 when leaders were separated from their social base in many parts of the province. Assumed in Surjeet's formulation is also the notion of the critical role of the leadership in a movement—otherwise, why should its loss or its emergence be an important issue?

Many others, too, expressed themselves in similar fashion. The necessity of providing leadership to a movement, the critical role played by leaders, is an assumption that is commonly and freely made, sometimes overtly, sometimes implicitly. Bhagat Singh Bilga, one of the most important Ghadar/Kirti Moscow-trained leaders who was in the thick of the movement in its most critical phase from 1937–39, stated the understanding most clearly and has already been cited at length (see Chapter 5, Section I). He dismissed all suggestions of "spontaneous movement" and asserted with total conviction that the peasant movement was a totally planned one—that the best organizers were sent to the most difficult areas where no movement existed, such as Kangra, where Lahori Ram Pardesi went, lived in a temple, learnt the local language, the local songs, composed songs in the local language which he then sang in the villages to attract the attention of the peasants. He also gave the example of Baba Jwala Singh, who went to Nili Bar and Montgomery to build up the movement among the colony tenants and whose loss in an automobile accident in 1938 was a big blow to the movement in that area.

In a similar vein, Jagir Singh Joga from Patiala pointed out how Dharam Singh Fakkar who had been sent by the Communist Party to organize the labour in the Assam Tea plantations was recalled to lead the *muzaras* in their struggle. Dharam Singh came from a *muzara* family and it was expected that he would be able to—as he was—provide leadership to the movement. That even the Patiala *muzaras*, with a strong sense of their rights and the justice of their cause, needed trained leaders and could not just produce them at will on their own, is proof enough of the critical role of leadership as well as of its not emerging "automatically", on its own. In Joga's words, they needed to recall Dharam Singh because "there was no leader of the *muzaras*, though there was a stirring among them".

Jagbir Singh Chhina, the nephew of Achhar Singh Chhina, whose experience and importance were nowhere near that of Surjeet or Joga or Bilga, analysed the lack of peasant participation in the Quit India Movement and the lack of any peasant struggles during 1942–45 in terms of the reluctance of the Communists to give leadership to the peasants in this direction, due to their adherence to the People's War line. "Of course, it is the people who keep a movement going, but you need leaders and organizers to launch it", he said. The weakness or strength of a movement is also linked to the availability of leadership.

Baba Bachittar Singh, probably my oldest witness, who was a grassroots level-organizer of the *muzara* Movement in Patiala, pointed out how *batai* or rent was refused by *muzaras* only in villages where political workers or cadre were present, because it was they who gave strength to the *muzaras*. Nor did he have any illusions about leaders being able to create movements at will or even retain their influence when peasants felt they no longer needed them. Of the Patiala *muzaras*, he said, once they got the land, they turned their back on us: "Nowadays they don't even offer us a drink of water".

Others, too, had their own wisdom to add. Narain Singh Shahbazpuri, expanding on the role of leaders, said: "They should not all the time keep worrying about what the people will say. If they do that, then both the leader and the people will be ruined". Leaders, in other words, must also lead, they must not be led, otherwise they are not leaders. He added, of course, that "the job of the leaders is also to win over the hearts and minds of the people". Ruldu Khan, the leader of the tenants and agricultural labourers, was categorical that "there is no struggle without volunteers or cadre. Therefore the first task in the organization of a struggle is to hold meetings and recruit volunteers". "Of course", he pointed out, "movements also spread by example. Once there is a strong struggle in an area, it can spread to nearby areas". In other words, struggle is contagious, and once it has caught on in one place, its possibility demonstrated, its very strength leads to its imitation. Balwant Singh Azad, who came from a low caste background and remained an ordinary political worker, said: "A movement spreads from the towns to the villages. Villagers are backward, less educated. The movement gets off the ground only when we—leaders and political workers—go to the people, explain the issues, tell them what is to be done, give a line of action". Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri pointed to the lack of any struggle among the tenants in the landlord pockets of Ambala District and explained it by the shortage of cadre.

It is necessary to clarify that the emphasis placed by the peasant leaders on the role of leaders and cadre in a movement is not to be understood as their underplaying or refusing to recognize the necessity of the pre-requisite of what Joga called "a stirring" among the people. It is this stirring, this discontent, that leaders mobilized into effective action. That our witnesses were more than aware of this is shown by their analysis of the reasons for the lack of a movement among the Muslim tenants of western Punjab which has been discussed separately in Chapter 8. In fact, they recognize that the cadre, or the leadership itself, emerges out of a movement and this is the reason given by them for shortage of Muslim cadre—there was no movement, especially a nationalist movement, among the Muslims therefore there was a shortage of Muslim cadre that could, in turn, mobilize the Muslim tenants. Surjeet, too, when discussing the impact of the Muslim nationality

line of the CPI of the mid-1940s, which led to the "lending" of Communist Muslim cadre to the Muslim League in the hope that they would influence the League, lamented that Ataullah Jahaniah, one of their best Muslim mass political workers, of whom there was a great shortage, was sent off to the League and he never came back! Surjeet knew that you could not have Ataullah Jahaniahs made to order; the loss, in the context of the lower availability of Muslim cadre, was a serious one.

In fact, what is significant is that much more than the class or caste or religious background of the leaders being seen as a determinant of the source from which political leaders or cadre emerge, it is the *political background* that is emphasized. Surjeet, for example, when asked to discuss the sources from which the left leadership emerged, identified five political streams or sources: the national and Akali Movements, the Mujahirs, products of the Khilafat Movement who went into exile in Afghanistan and thence to the Soviet Union and became Communists; the trade union movement; those who became Communists in London; and in later years, the student movement. In fact, he took great pains to analyze the reasons why young people of upper class background became Communists as students in England or in Lahore and commented approvingly on their dedication to the cause, their comradely behaviour and the like. This emphasis on the political movements themselves as sources of cadre and leaders echoes Wolf and Shils in its recognition of the importance of politicization in the making of political workers. It is this, more than their social origin, that appears to have had a decisive impact on the emergence of leadership at all levels.

An aspect that emerges very sharply in the Indian context, but has possibly not appeared in that fashion in the literature on movements elsewhere in the world, is the importance of the sacrifices made by the leaders in shaping their influence on the people. Any number of our respondents pointed to this factor and Karam Singh Mann, the London-trained barrister, put it most succintly: "The Indian people appreciate sacrifice (*tyag*) and service (*seva*). Without this you cannot appeal to them. This is our cultural environment".[55] The impact of the tremendous sacrifices made by the Ghadri Babas who gave up everything and spent decades in jail was pointed out by many. Just a message from them was considered enough to make people do their bidding.[56] For others as well, the amount of sacrifice made

[55] Interview.

[56] Jagjit Singh Anand, for example, said that the Ghadari Babas, such as Baba Wasakha Singh, the founder of the Desh Bhagat Parivar Sahayak Committee, had so much influence that as late as 1943, when the Communists were fighting a bye-election to the provincial legislature from Montgomery District with Baba Jaswant Singh Arifwala as their candidate, they used to hand a chit from Baba Wasakha Singh to the peasants, many of whom were ex-soldiers, which said that the bearer of this note will tell you your duty. He also said that he himself was deeply influenced by the Ghadari Babas, Sher Singh Mainpuri and Wasakha Singh (interview).

was a matter of constant comment. The role of example, which was to be set by the leaders themselves, was obviously tremendous. As Jagbir Singh Chhina put it:[57] "People do not join a movement only because of ideas, personalities are also important".

Harkishen Singh Surjeet, for example, referred to the Communist "tradition of sacrifice and struggle". He also described his father's and his mother's sacrifices for the cause of the anti-imperialist struggle. Nor were his own sacrifices any less. Between 1935 and 1954, because of a combination of arrests, externments and underground work, he could spend a total of six months with his wife.[58] Jagir Singh Joga's sacrifices as well as his honesty were legendary. In 1948, when the Communists left the Praja Mandal, he handed over Rs. 0.2 million to the Praja Mandal which he had personally collected for the organization and which was in his hands. His image as one who forsook power and was always sacrificing for the cause of the struggle was so strong that Giani Zail Singh, an old associate from the Praja Mandal days, who later became the president of India, once said to him: "Joga, even if a revolution occurs and your own party comes to power, I am sure *you* will move into the opposition. You can never be on the side that is in power. You will always be on the side that is taking the beating and struggling".[59] Many others had their properties confiscated many times over, faced long terms of imprisonment, and the like.[60]

And this was obviously a part of the consciousness of the people as well as of the leaders. Calls to action were always accompanied by reminders of the sacrifices of the leaders. Smaller leaders talked of the sacrifices of the bigger ones. That this was part of "our cultural environment", as Karam Singh Mann said, is more than suggested by the long Indian tradition of renunciation of worldly pleasures by those who seek a higher truth, who live for a higher ideal. The importance of the notion of sacrifice in the national movement has been often noted; it clearly applied to its other constituent movements as well.

A closer look will reveal many more such aspects, which remain hidden from our sight because we have not looked for them, and in this search the "collective wisdom" of the movements themselves can act as a beacon.

The practitioners of the "subaltern" approach, however, tend largely, with some exceptions as in the case of Sarkar, to ignore these aspects of the experience of the real flesh and blood peasants. Perhaps the explanation lies in the manner in which the basic model or paradigm of peasant insurgency is formulated by Ranajit Guha and which forms the point of

[57] Interview.
[58] Interview.
[59] Interview with Jagir Singh Joga.
[60] For example, interviews with Dalip Singh Tapiala, Bhagat Singh Bilga, Chain Singh Chain, Sushila Chain, Ujagar Singh Bilga and Shakuntala Rishi.

departure for the whole "subaltern" approach. The aspect of leadership has no place in and is not a constituent element of his paradigm and therefore there is no framework available for its consideration. Of course, the reason it finds no place in the model is also apparent: it would upset the model itself. A paradigm or model built around the basic notion of subaltern or peasant "autonomy" cannot accommodate "outsiders" as leaders without bringing into question the whole notion of "autonomy" or so severely limiting its scope as to render it of little use as an analytical category. In other words, the "subaltern" perspective has no room for the consideration of the possibility—a possibility strongly suggested by historical evidence—that it was the very "subalternity" of the vast mass of the Indian peasantry, its very backwardness and deprivation—political, economic, social, educational and cultural—that made it historically imperative that the initiative for its organization and mobilization for resistance as well as its leadership came largely from "outsiders" or from "insiders" who had had exposure to the world outside through travel or education or some other means. In fact, the whole "subaltern" theoretical framework evolved by Guha is seriously conditioned by this and other "exclusions", "omissions" and "silences"; and these are integral to the method he adopts for constructing his paradigm.

Despite the apparent differences in focus—the subalternists "privileging" violent resistance and Scott "privileging" everyday, essentially nonviolent resistance—the recent work of Scott, too, does not offer a framework or even elements of it that can be of help in analyzing these aspects of peasant experience—of leadership, its social origins, or of the need for outside leadership or outside ideologies. And this for the following reasons: First, because it does not address these issues as it consciously eschews the connections with larger politics and is deliberately not a study of overt peasant protest. In fact, it is based on the strong conviction that such type of protest—participation in revolutions or revolts—has not benefited the peasants, they have only contributed the cannon fodder and enabled one variety of élites to dislodge another and derived nothing in the bargain. And that, whatever improvements peasants have been able to secure in their conditions of life, are more a consequence of their everyday class struggle than of their big revolts. Consequently, he turns his attention away from peasant rebellions to their everyday resistance. Inevitably, therefore, he does not address issues of leadership, because everyday resistance, by its very nature—foot-dragging, petty theft, ridicule, etc.—is carried on by individual peasants and does not require organization or leadership or collective action.

Second, and even more important, his model of everyday resistance cannot be used to understand the significance of outside leadership or outside ideologies in peasant protest because, as in the case of the subalterns, he

too believes that peasants are not hegemonized by traditional élite ideologies—in fact their capacity to carry on everyday class struggle on their own is proof of this. That they do not revolt or resist overtly is because of the high costs of violent resistance, which they have learnt and not because they are under élite ideological hegemony. An already ideologically autonomous peasantry, and moreover one that has learnt that it should not engage in large-scale protest, can obviously have no need or use for new liberating outside ideologies or outside leaders who would be the carriers of these ideologies and assist in the organization of protest. As with the subalterns, then, a consideration of these aspects of peasant resistance is excluded from his framework.[61]

Social Origins of Participants

It is difficult to answer most questions relating to peasants with a great degree of certainty, but the opaqueness of the data increases considerably when we raise the question of the class origins of the participants in protest movements. In the Indian case at least, the transparency increases and visibility improves if the same question is translated into categories of region, village, tenurial status, caste, religion and sex. For example, I can identify the spatial areas in which peasant protest was located, almost down to each village, quite easily; I can say with a fair degree of accuracy to which religion and castes or sex the participants tended to belong; I can even tell whether they were largely landowning peasants or tenants or agricultural labourers; but, I cannot say, with anything like the same degree of confidence, to which classes they belonged, that is, whether they were rich, middle, or poor peasants.

One part of the reason is located in the paucity of data on the issue—government reports or newspapers are hardly likely to give statistics of the land owned or cultivated by participants in the *jathas* or the members of the crowd at a public meeting. The only source that appears reliable on this question is the accounts of those who organized and led the peasants—only they knew the peasants from quarters close enough and only they knew enough peasants, to be able to generalize with any degree of accuracy. The evidence is therefore necessarily qualitative but its value is that it is based on personal experience of the rarest kind—after all, those whose job was to get people to struggle, ought to know which kinds responded more than others and why.

[61] This perspective is argued by James Scott at length in his *Weapons of the Weak*. See especially, pp. xv–xvii and Chapter 8 of this work.

Their answers to the questions relating to the social base of the movement also provide an indicator to the categories in which they thought about the participants. For example, the most common answer to the question, among whom was the peasant movement the strongest, would be in terms of the area of its strength. Almost everybody would point out that it was strongest in the districts of central Punjab, especially Jullundur, Amritsar, Hoshiarpur, Lahore and Ludhiana and in the colony district of Lyallpur, and then among the tenants in the Nili Bar–Montgomery–Multan belt, with pockets in Ferozepore, Hoshiarpur and the like and also in the princely state of Patiala. On further probing the answer would be: the majority participants were Sikhs, few Hindus because there were few Hindu peasants and fewer Muslims.

Also, in their account, there would be constant references to "strong" villages, villages where the landlords were paid no *batai*, or villages which stood as a block and refused to pay land revenue or some other tax, or villages that provided many members to a *jatha*, or welcomed a *jatha*. The British, too, recognized this and imposed fines, called punitive taxes, on and posted punitive police posts in villages as a whole. In fact, one could say that it was the village that was the basic unit of politicization and participation. It was a whole village that was described as a "nationalist" village, or a nationalist fortress (garh). Again, whole villages identified with leaders who belonged to the village and were referred to as so–and–so's village in which it was assumed he had an unshakable base.

Obviously, there was a strong sense of community among the landowning peasants of the village, big and small, which was facilitated by the landowning body usually belonging to a single caste and even sub-caste in any particular village, as well as by the nature of traditional social and economic arrangements in the *jajmani* system which meant that the landowning community dealt as a unit with other castes—artisans, moneylenders, wage labourers, etc., and also by the fact that even under the British land revenue system the village was considered a single revenue unit and theoretically at least was collectively responsible for the payment of taxes.[62]

[62] An insight provided by Wolf may be useful here. While discussing which kinds of peasants are likely to be the torch-bearers of protest, he points to the suitability of physically separated "frontier" areas, or culturally separated enclaves as likely centres of revolt. However, he also says that "separation from the state or the surrounding populace need not be only physical or cultural...the organization of the peasantry into self-administering communes with stipulated responsibilities to state and landlords created in both cases (Russian and Mexican) veritable fortresses of peasant tradition within the body of the country itself." Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, pp. 293–94. While the landowning village community in the Indian case in the twentieth century was perhaps nowhere as cohesive as the Russian communes, yet the notion of the village as a cohesive social unit still survived, despite the considerable erosion that had taken place.

Bhagat Singh Bilga, for example, refers to his village. Bilga in the Jullundur District as a very politically-minded village. The "village" would not co-operate with government officials, the "village" would not give them even water to drink. It was the "village" that helped him to sustain his politics. Dalip Singh Tapiala and many others referred to Harsa Chhina, the base of the Mogha Morcha in 1946, as an old nationalist village and Achhar Singh Chhina's belonging to that village was a matter of pride as well as a surety that it was a strong base of the movement. Dalip Singh Jauhal, too, talked of "villages" in his area being politicized and nationalist. Bachittar Singh's wife recounted that she would hide Teja Singh Swatantar, the famous leader of the Lal Communist Party, in her village in Patiala because "the police could not enter my house because the whole village supported us". Jagir Singh Joga said that the *biswedars'* hired *gundas* "would not even dare to enter the village to collect *batai* or occupy land if the village was strong". Giani Bachan Singh of Patiala also continually referred to "villages" that refused *batai*.[63]

Predictably, then, the answers to even more pointed questions on the class belonging of participants in struggle are more ambiguous. Distinctions based on tenurial status—landowning or landless tenants or landless wage labourers—get made more easily than distinctions within the landowning peasants or within tenants. Answers also vary according to the area of experience of the respondents. I first give some examples of answers to convey the differential flavour of the responses and then attempt a general assessment.[64]

Master Hari Singh, for example, said that in the peasant movement in Kapurthala, which he led and which occurred around the issue of land revenue reduction in the mid-1930s, small and big peasants all joined in. The majority were Sikhs, there were a few Muslims and no Hindus because there were hardly any Hindu peasants. In British Punjab, he says, the base of the movement was among what he calls the liberal landlords (to distinguish them, I presume, from feudal landlords), rich peasants, but only those who had risen through hard work or got money from abroad and not those who were *zaildars* (a kind of semi-government functionary recruited from the rural élite). In Patiala, he said, there were very few rich tenants and the movement was among tenants who were mostly not well-to-do. G.S. Randhawa, who was closely associated with the Patiala struggle, said that among the occupancy tenants who were the backbone of the *muzara* struggle were large, middle and small tenants. Shakuntala Sharda Rishi, who was active mainly in the 1940s, said the support came mostly from middle peasants, and the more well-to-do were less in evidence. Ruldu

[63] This paragraph is based on interviews with the people mentioned by name in the text.

[64] The next two paragraph are based on interviews with the people mentioned by name in the text.

Khan says the movement among tenants in Ferozepur District included all, big and small. Among tenants, he said, the better-off tenants provided the lead, just as among *kisans*, or landowning peasants, the better-off ones took the initiative. The better-off ones had a greater capacity to sacrifice because of greater resources. The poorer ones were more afraid, could not give up their livelihood so easily. Therefore, the well-to-do gave the lead, and the less well-to-do stood behind them, he said.

Jagbir Singh Chhina, of Harsa Chhina Village in Amritsar District, said there were no landlords or rich peasants in his area and 90 per cent owned less than 5 acres each. Among those who participated were many small peasants. Sikhs were more in evidence, Hindus and Muslims much less. Joginder Singh Chhina, of the same village, said all those who were nationalist were with them, big and small. Only the Unionist or Zamindara League type of people did not support them. Sohan Singh Narangabadi, also from Amritsar, said it was the middle strata who were most sympathetic to them. The hard-core Akalis did not support their movement. Ram Singh Majitha, also from Amritsar District, said that the big fellows were pro-British and they were supported mostly by small *kisans* (he has no category of middle peasants, so his "small" probably means those who were not big). He adds that all movements, including the Akali Movement, had found their base in the same strata of small peasants. Similarly, all movements—1907, Ghadar, 1919, Akali Movement—had their base mainly among Sikh peasants and very few Hindus and Muslims were in evidence. Narain Singh Shahbazpuri pointed out that those who owned land and had a stable income could sacrifice more and were therefore more active in the movement. He makes the distinction to say that agricultural labourers had sympathy, but could not participate because of lack of a stable income.

The general impression that emerges, accounting for local variations, is that self-cultivating landowning peasants, small as well as large, tended to support the movement, though a stronger generalization about active participation on a mass scale can perhaps be made for those in the middle-income group, whose strong motivation born out of greater economic pressure was greater than that of the more well-to-do and whose capacity to hold out was larger than that of those who were harder pressed than they were. However, this point should not be pushed too far, in the light of other extenuating factors such as political motivation which may be even stronger in the case of many well-to-do peasants, even though not everywhere and not as a whole. We do need to take seriously the strong assertions by many leaders that all tenants, big and small, or all peasants, big and small, supported the struggles—if they were in an area where the national and peasant struggle was strong, or if they were in a village which was a stronghold. We also need to pay heed to Ruldu Khan's statement that whether it was among the landowning peasants or the tenants, the

better-off took the lead, could make greater sacrifices and the less well-off followed in their footsteps.

The movement also got the support of the women. This support was expressed in a number of ways. Women attended meetings and conferences, though in smaller numbers than men. There were also *jathas* of women who participated in the Lahore Kisan Morcha in 1939 and the Harsa Chhina Morcha in 1946. (see Chapters 5 and 6.) They also looked after *jathas*, who went through their villages *en route* to the *morchas*, as well as activists who came to their villages to give speeches or enlist members or collect grain. Financial contributions, and especially those in grain, were made with their consent. They also gave active support and encouragement to the menfolk in strengthening their resolve to participate in political protest. In fact, the general impression one gets is that not only did women bear with courage the consequences of the political activities of the menfolk of the family or the village, but that they acted as powerful counterweights to any weakening of the men's resolve. For example, the famous Ghadar/Kirti leader Achhar Singh Chhina's mother was allowed to meet him in the Lahore Fort where he was kept in solitary confinement (after being apprehended on his return to India in 1936 after a gap of 20 years) in the expectation that she would break down on seeing her son after so long and beg him to give up his politics. On the contrary, she only told him to adhere to his revolve and make sure he did not bring a bad name to the family by any show of weakness. As a consequence, her visits were ordered to be stopped.[65] I have already narrated the story of Harkishen Singh Surjeet's mother who, despite being reduced to abject poverty, supported fully her husband's political activities. The examples are many, not only from Punjab, but from all across the country, of women being more than willing to sacrifice and in fact insisting that the men stick to the chosen path.[66] This critical aspect of the women's role in political movements cannot be minimized or considered only as proof of their subordinate position as "passive supporters", and thus trivialized.

Women activists also indicate that, in the 1940s, an effort, though small, was made to raise issues pertaining specially to women, such as the position of women, of girl-children, of lack of women's education and the like at least at the level of discussions with women in the villages. Sushila Chain and Shakuntala Sharda Rishi, the two women activists I interviewed, also talked about holding separate meetings of women in village houses during their village tours and also of attempts to hold discussions on issues pertaining particularly to women. Sushila Chain mentions that in the villages

[65] Interview with Jagbir Singh Chhina.

[66] In the course of our research on the national movement we collected any number of such examples.

the very idea of women sitting in a chair and presiding over a meeting or giving speeches was revolutionary and created quite a stir. Interestingly, however, they do not mention any active resistance, but emphasize that they never faced any harassment and were treated with great respect, though they were really quite young girls at the time.[67] Their unmarried status, however, did create some problems and Sushila Chain at least felt that she was really pressurized by the Communist Party into marriage with her comrade Chain Singh Chain, even though she was told that it was only a formality and that she need not consummate it if she wished. She was also not too happy about being "pushed" into working on the "women's front" in the mid 1940s and considered it an attempt at stereotyping of women activists. On her own she would have much preferred working in the general political movement.[68]

On one thing, however, all our evidence is crystal clear. There was hardly any participation in any political movement, either nationalist or Akali, or in peasant struggles, by those at the lowest end of the social and economic scale—the low-caste agricultural labourers and artisans. As discussed at length in Chapter 11, there were neither any struggles over wages, nor were there any food riots or looting of bazaars and *hats*, forms usually associated with the very poor. The definition of "village" used by activists, in fact, did not include these sections—it referred to the landowning peasant community. The general impression one gets, including from left-wing activists, is that the landless poor were so socially oppressed and excluded and so economically vulnerable that the question of their participation in any political movement or economic struggles did not arise. Even if they had some sympathy for the movement, they could not, as explained by Narain Singh Shahbazpuri,[69] participate because their families had nothing to fall back upon if they suspended their livelihood for the struggle.[70] Harkishen Singh Surjeet gave a slightly different explanation. He said that "in the consciousness of the leadership, the importance of agricultural labour was (just) not there. Because at that time it was a peasant movement and agricultural labour was expected to follow". He followed this up with a story about untouchability and how its violation by some of them who were young boys led to social ostracism, thus indicating the strong caste prejudice that inhibited any integration into a common struggle.[71] Many others, including Sohan Singh Narangabadi, Balwant Singh Azad and Shakuntala Sharda

[67] Interviews with Sushila Chain and Shakuntala Sharda Rishi.
[68] Interview with Sushila Chain.
[69] Interview.
[70] In the course of our research on the Indian national movement in different parts of the country, we often received a similar answer from political activists of all hues to the question about the low participation of the very poor in the national movement.
[71] Interview.

Rishi, pointed out that Harijans were just too oppressed and too backward for participation in any struggles.[72]

In fact, a major aspect that needs more attention is the significance of caste status, and stemming from that the self-perceptions of different caste groups, as a factor influencing political participation. It does appear that peasant castes with a strong sense of their own important status in society, such as the Jats, were found in much larger numbers in political movements, at least in the initial period. The intermediate castes, such as Kambohs, came later and in fewer numbers, except when they formed the main body of the cultivators, as among tenants in the canal colonies. And the lowest castes were the least in evidence. Further, within the castes, class status appears to have been of less importance in determining participation than politicization—the movement will be weaker even among Jat cultivators in areas of weaker politicization and stronger among Jats as a whole—regardless of class status—in the stronger areas. However, within a strong caste in a strong village or a strong area of the movement those with greater resources and therefore greater holding power were more likely to play a leading role. But this would exclude those members of the upper strata of peasants who were loyalist elements either because of their loyalist traditions or because they were beneficiaries of the colonial state by virtue of being government or semi-government functionaries or with a tradition of service in the army.

The evidence from Punjab is supported by case studies from other regions as well. In Gujarat, Patidar peasants appear to have behaved in ways similar to those of the Punjab Jats, as shown in Hardiman's study—though I do not accept unequivocally his formulation that nationalism became a means of enhancing their social position, of gaining prestige.[73] Even if it did, it appears to have been a considerable achievement to delink rise in social status from the traditional path of greater purity in religious observance or aping of upper caste customs and link it with contribution to the struggle against imperialism! Similarly, in the area of Midnapore in Bengal studied so thoroughly by Hites Sanyal, the Mahisya peasants appear to have constituted a similar category.[74] This may also be true of Bhumihars in Bihar, on whom Swami Sahajanand and others relied throughout the 1930s for the major part of their support, of the Kammas and Reddys in coastal Andhra, the Kunbis in Maharashtra and other similar groups elsewhere.

[72] Interviews. I am not elaborating further on this aspect of the lack of social base of peasant protest among the lowest strata of the rural population as I deal with it at great length in Chapter 11 in the context of peasant consciousness.

[73] See Hardiman, *Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat*.

[74] See Hites Sanyal, "Congress Movements in the Villages of Eastern Midnapore, 1921–31", in *Asie du Sud, Traditions et Changements, Colloques Internationaux du Centre National de la Recherche Scientifique*, 582, Paris.

This also means that theories seeking to explain peasant participation in protest movements, whatever their other merit, would have to be considerably modified to accommodate these and other specific features of society when they are sought to be applied in the Indian context. For example, the essence of what is known as the middle peasant thesis, as evolved by Wolf,[75] that it is peasants who have a greater freedom of operation that form the backbone of peasant revolts in the twentieth century, can be used with benefit to grasp Indian peasant protest as well. But other elements of his thesis—that middle peasants are able to do this because of their lower degree of integration into the network of capitalist commercialization, caused either by their physical location on the frontiers of their societies, or because of their isolation through social and economic institutions such as the communes, or, and also, because their control over sufficient land enables them to retain or become subsistence producers when need be and also because of other associated factors—are not so easily transferable to the Indian scene. In India, the network of colonial capitalist commercialization had, by the twentieth century and even by the middle of the nineteenth century in most areas, penetrated deep into the countryside and had spared no section of rural society, not even the tribals. Further, the modern colonial bureaucratic state had spread its tentacles far and wide and there were no "frontier regions" comparable to the Mexican or Chinese or other such cases. The total sway of the systems of rural taxation, accompanied by widespread indebtedness, ruled out the option of retreat into subsistence cultivation—taxes had to be paid in cash and dishonoured debts led to loss of land. Also, the whole category of rich peasants defined by the predominant use of wage labour for commercial farming was not widely applicable in the Indian context, and certainly not in Punjab, as I have argued at great length in my *Colonializing Agriculture,* Chapters 4, 5 and 6. Besides, in India seasonal wage labour was used by those who are otherwise categorized as middle peasants and even sometimes by small peasants. The point I wish to make is that considerable modifications of existing theory are necessitated, though the insights can be used imaginatively.

Some theories, however, may not be of much help at all in grasping the subtleties and nuances of differential participation, since the simplistic and *a priori* assumptions around which they are constructed act as barriers to, rather than facilitators of, complex analysis. The subalternists' theory of the inherent rebelliousness or revolutionariness of the peasantry, which appears to be based on some notion of a correspondence between exploitation and deprivation and resistance and revolutionariness, a natural corollary being that the more exploited or deprived sections of the peasantry are

[75] See Wolf, *Peasant Wars,* particularly the conclusion, pp. 276–302.

more revolutionary or more militant, is one such example. Ranajit Guha talks of "the notion of resistance to élite domination" being "one of [the] invariant features" of subaltern politics, whose "idioms, norms and values" were "endowed" by the "experience of exploitation and labour"[76] Sumit Sarkar contrasts the "movements of tribals and low caste agricultural labourers or poor peasants", often very militant and occasionally "far-reaching in aims", with "those of relatively substantial upper and intermediate caste landholding peasants which tended to be both more limited in objectives and pacific in methods",[77] thus clearly assuming a link between greater deprivation and greater militancy. Unfortunately, Sarkar neither specifies the lower caste or tribal movements he has in mind which fit this bill, nor does his silence on the definition of their "far-reaching aims" enlighten us any more than Ranajit Guha's cryptic assertion that the aim of peasant rebels was "power in one form or another".[78] And nor does this assumption appear sustainable on the basis of existing knowledge of the experience of the Indian peasantry, including the agricultural labourers and lower castes and not even on the basis of that of the Chinese or Russian peasantries.

For China, Bianco has shown that as far as spontaneous peasant action was concerned, the most deprived sections, tenants and agricultural labourers, were the least rebellious and the vast majority of non-Communist-led peasant movements in Republican China were by independent peasant producers against heavy taxation. Anti-landlord movements were much less in evidence, and even less frequent were movements of debtors against moneylenders and of agricultural labourers. In fact, agricultural labourers, the most deprived section, rarely went beyond making petitions. Therefore, if the most deprived and exploited sections of the Chinese peasantry ultimately became revolutionary, it was because they were provided the necessary impetus, organization, ideology and psychological frame of mind by the "Communist revolutionary élite".[79] Hamza Alavi, too, argues that in China "the poor peasantry were mobilized only after a new phase of the Chinese Revolution opened with the establishment of a new base in the Chingkang mountains, after the successful counter revolution led by Chiang Kai-Shek in 1927 forced the Communists to take refuge there".[80]

Lenin assessed the experience of the Russian peasants in a similar though even more explicit manner:[81]

[76] Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", p. 5.
[77] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 7.
[78] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, p. 10.
[79] Bianco, "*Peasants and Revolution*", pp. 315–18, 331.
[80] Alavi, "*Peasants and Revolution*", in A. R. Desai, ed., Peasant Struggles in India, Delhi, 1979.
[81] V.I. Lenin, Collected Works, Vol. 2, p. 647, cited in Alavi, "*Peasants and Revolution*", p. 684.

> A truth which has been fully proved by Marxist theory and fully corroborated by the experience of the proletarian revolution in Russia, viz. although all the three above enumerated categories of the rural population (i.e., the rural proletariat, semi-proletarians and small peasants)... are economically, socially and culturally interested in the victory of socialism, they are capable of giving resolute support to the revolutionary proletariat only after the latter has won political power, only after it has resolutely dealt with the big landowners and capitalists, only after these downtrodden people see in practice that they have an organized leader and champion, strong and firm enough to assist and lead them and show them the right path.

Hamza Alavi, too, notes that in Russia in 1917 "the rural proletarians ... joined with the others in the looting, but did not emerge as an independent force and did not rise against their masters, the kulaks".[82] Lenin's own observation corroborates this view of the small role played by the rural proletariat in the peasant revolts of 1917:[83] "Owing to the immaturity, the backwardness, the ignorance, precisely of the poor peasants, the leadership (in the Soviets) passed into the hands of the kulaks.... A year after the proletarian revolution in the capitals, and under its influence and with its assistance, the proletarian revolution began in the remote rural districts". Hamza Alavi himself is very categorical in his view that "... poor peasants are initially the least militant class of the peasantry ... (because) the inherent weakness in his situation renders him more open to intimidation, and setbacks can easily demoralize him.... He finally and irrevocably takes the road to revolution only when he is shown in practice that the power of the master can be irrevocably broken, then the possibility of an alternative mode of existence becomes real to him".[84] Whatever the other merits of "the middle peasant" thesis, as formulated first by Alavi and later elaborated, with variations, by Wolf, it does emphasize that the revolutionariness or militancy of poor peasants is not spontaneous or automatic or innate, but exists at best in potential and needs a specific set of conditions before it can be realised. Whether or not, as the proponents of this thesis argue, the crucial factor in its realisation is the leading role of the middle peasant is a matter for debate and concrete historical investigation.

In India, too, apart from the tribals who represent a very special case because of the distinct nature of their social organization, the most deprived and exploited sections of the peasantry, sharecroppers and agricultural laboures, have usually been the last to join peasant movements and

[82] Alavi, *ibid.*, p. 682.
[83] V.I. Lenin, *ibid.*, pp. 683–84.
[84] Alavi, "*Peasants and Revolution*", p. 715.

struggles. They began to get organized on any significant scale only in the late 1930s and 1940s, mostly under left initiative. In fact, even the left failed to organize agricultural labourers for their own demands on any scale before Independence, except in parts of coastal Andhra.[85] In the Telengana armed struggle as well, agricultural labourers were mobilized into the movement only in its later phase.[86] On the other hand, where the process of politicization had already reached an advanced stage as a result of earlier movements and ideological and political preparation, sections of the poor and low caste peasantry and agricultural labourers participated in the struggles from the very initial stage, a good example being the Quit India Movement in the Eastern UP and Bihar.[87]

Given the experience of peasant movements in other parts of the world, this should in any case hardly cause such surprise. But more particularly, closer home, given the long history of caste division between high caste and low caste and more so between those within the caste system and those outside it—the outcastes or the untouchables who constituted the bulk of the agricultural labour—it is even less surprising that, where extreme social disability was added to economic wretchedness, the emergence of social awareness and the ability to resist oppression was likely to be an extremely difficult and protracted process. This centuries-old divide,[88] deeply rooted as it is in the consciousness of both those within the caste society and those outside it, not only acts as a constraint on the emergence of resistance among the latter, but also acts, to this day, as a formidable barrier preventing the building of solidarity in common struggle. In the words of Irfan Habib: "It is apparent, however, that many of the burdensome vestiges of the past, the divisions and superstitions, still hinder the cementing of those bonds among the peasants and the rural poor which are so essential for the advance towards a just society in India".[89]

[85] In coastal Andhra, the work of the mobilization and organization of agricultural labour was begun by Communists in the late 1930s and by the mid–1940s they were able, at least in some pockets, to organize movements for increase in wages, wages in kind to be given with correct measures, for holidays and regular hours of work. See Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle*, pp. 142, 152, 154.

[86] In Sundarayya's account, for example, references to agricultural labour's demands and participation begin to appear only when he is discussing the movement in its later phases, from 1947 onwards. *Ibid.*, pp. 116–18, 124–27, 193–94.

[87] See Mitra, *Political Mobilization and the Nationalist Movement*, and Singha, *Aspects of the Quit India Movement*.

[88] Irfan Habib dates the structuring of the basic contours of the caste system, with a peasantry deeply divided into endless endogamous communities and rigorously separated from the artisans as well as "menial labourers" to the five hundred years preceding the birth of Christ. Habib, "The Peasant in Indian History", p. 34.

[89] *Ibid.*, p. 64.

The "subaltern" historians, however, in their anxiety to establish the independent existence of the subaltern domain, emphasize only "the subalternity (that was) common to all the social constituents of this domain"[90] and fail to see the differentiation that existed between the different "constituents of this domain". In the whole of Ranajit Guha's monograph,[91] for example, there is not even a mention of the economic and social disabilities, that is, landlessness and untouchability, which separated the mass of the agricultural labourers from even the poorest petty-holder. An enquiry into "peasant consciousness" that does not even examine the possibility that there might be differences in the consciousness of landowning peasants and agricultural labourers (who had been debarred for more than 2000 years from owning land and whose touch or even shadow could defile their landowning neighbours), that the way in which an agricultural labourer sees the world around him may be very different from the way in which the landowning peasant who is part of the village brotherhood locates himself, is clearly falling short of its stated objectives.

In contrast, it is an "élite" Marxist historian, Irfan Habib, who has tried to find an explanation for this feature of Indian agrarian society by which the untouchables were "excluded from the village and prevented from holding land". He argues that "the immense seasonal fluctuation in demand for labour on the field called for a constant reserve of accessible labour-supply. Theoretically, this could have been created by simple free market forces; but these would have enlarged the share of wage costs in the peasant's produce and so correspondingly reduced the size of the surplus. The presence of a specially repressed proletariat was thus of advantage to almost every other class of rural society, the peasant as well as his superiors". He concludes that, under this system, "the peasant, sorely exploited himself, joined in practising the severest repression of the menial labour. This has surely been one of the fatal tragedies in Indian social history".[92] Irfan Habib, thus, clearly sees that this system, *from which even the peasant stood to gain at the expense of the agricultural labourer*, would create a clear line of division between these two "subaltern" groups. And it should be emphasized, as I have done earlier, that in India, agricultural labour is seasonally employed not only by the well-to-do sections of the peasants or by those who could be defined as rich peasants but also very largely by those who go under the category of middle peasants, as well as to a limited extent by small or poor peasants. This means that middle and even some sections of poor peasants have an interest in keeping the wages of agricultural labour as low as possible. And if you add to this the fact that even the poorest landowning

[90] Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of India", p. 5.
[91] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*.
[92] Habib, "The Peasant in Indian History", pp. 39–40.

"caste" peasant feels superior to his untouchable neighbour, it is clear that the situation is not exactly one of an ideal "subaltern" solidarity. Such realities of "subaltern" life, however, continue to elude our "subaltern" historians.[93]

[93] Other, non-"subaltern", scholars of the Indian peasantry have also tried to analyse the reasons for the weakness of movements of the poor peasantry, both general and specifically Indian. B.B. Chaudhuri, for example, has pointed to the "fear" of the bargadars or sharecroppers "that by opposing their employers they risked losing their tiny plots of land", and "many bargadars altogether denied that they had cultivated lands on a crop-sharing basis". In his view, this was the major reason why the Kisan Sabha sometimes failed to attract sharecroppers and agricultural labourers in Bengal and Bihar into its fold. "*Agrarian Movements*", pp. 369–70. Krishnakant Sarkar, in his study of the Tebhaga Movement in Kakdwip, emphasizes the constraints imposed by the "peculiarities" of "the social system", which included the "rigid caste structure", "village factional quarrels", "communal feelings", "allegiance and dependence of the peasants on the landlords' agents", "the attitude of the peasants to the existing socio-economic system as immutable which accounted for their passivity and conservative outlook" and "their fear of landlords' power of money, police and lathials (goondas)". Krishnakant Sarkar, "Kakdwip Tebhaga Movement", in Desai, *Peasant Struggles in India*, pp. 473–74.

ELEVEN

Mapping Peasant Consciousness: Elements of an Alternative Framework

It is probably a truism that behind every action of protest or resistance or political assertion of rights is embedded a certain consciousness of the world in which we live, certain notions about the ways in which this world is different from the one in which our ancestors lived and on some vision or hope of the way the world should be. It is also true that not all of what may be there in our consciousness, our worldview, is expressed in overt action, since action is inevitably conditioned and constrained by the possibilities and space available for expression. My research, however, enables me to address only those aspects of peasant consciousness that were expressed in political action. The discussion here thus proceeds with a full consciousness of the limits of what it can explore.

Further limits are placed on this exploration by the general paucity of literature on the subject of the consciousness of peasants in India. This is, of course, partly a consequence of the fact that academic interest in peasant studies as a whole is of relatively recent origin, with most of the existing literature being a product of the last three decades. Inevitably and justifiably, the attention was first concentrated on the gathering and presentation of data on peasant protest and its more obvious roots in the prevailing structures of agrarian relations.

Perhaps less inevitably and less justifiably, however, even more recent efforts, which have sometimes loudly proclaimed their differences with and superiority over the earlier ones in addressing the subject of peasant consciousness, have not made much of an advance, either at the methodological or at the empirical plane. I am referring, of course, to the recent writings that have appeared under the banner of "subaltern studies". Most of the work that has appeared under this label is more concerned with asserting that "subaltern" consciousness is the "other" of élite consciousness, rather than with actually documenting or analyzing the precise content of peasant or other "subaltern" consciousness. For example, Ranajit

Guha, the chief spokesperson for the group, wanted to solve the very considerable problems posed for the study of peasant consciousness by the fact that peasants are not in the habit of leaving behind written records by the device of "decoding" élite discourse and reading it "as a writing in reverse". His solution is based on the assumption that subaltern consciousness is the reverse, the "other", the opposite of élite consciousness and can therefore be derived by the device of inverting or reversing the meanings of the terms of élite discourse.[1] In making this assumption, Guha forgets that one of the crucial attributes of subalternity, as pointed out by Antonio Gramsci whom Guha is so fond of quoting, is that the subaltern classes are hegemonized by the ideology of the dominant classes and that this "élite" ideology is part of their own consciousness, though their consciousness is broader than this and includes elements contrary to, contending with and antagonistic to elements of ruling class ideologies.[2]

Partha Chatterjee also agrees that the task of "recover[ing] this autonomous history of the subaltern classes ... is primarily a hermeneutic task for it means not so much the discovery of hitherto unknown or unused sources of historical information ... but rather the particular *reading* of the given historical material which record the perceptions and concerns of those who rule in order to infer from it the history of their adversaries, those who are ruled...."[3] Similarly, Gyan Pandey seeks to overturn the historiography of the peasant movement that took place in Awadh in 1919–22[4] without offering any evidence that is not already available in Majid Siddiqi's monograph on the same theme.[5]

Sumit Sarkar, while not offering any methodology for the study of subaltern consciousness, suggests that consciousness should be studied as "a hybrid 'collective mentality' of a group, class or region". This, in his view, is the way we can "try to grasp the complex and varying interrelations" and "the frequent interpenetration of diverse and even contradictory forms of consciousness, class, national, regional, caste or communal...."[6]

While his focus on the need to study the "interrelations" and "interpenetration" of diverse forms of consciousness is unexceptionable, it is not clear from his writing how the concept of "collective mentality"[7] will facilitate

[1] Guha, *Elementary Aspects of Peasant Insurgency*, pp. 16–17, 333.

[2] See Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, p. 333; and Joseph V. Femia, *Gramsci's Political Thought*, Oxford, 1981, pp. 45–52.

[3] Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal, 1920–1947, Volume One: The Land Question*, Calcutta, 1984, p. xii.

[4] Pandey, *"Peasant Revolt and Indian Nationalism"*.

[5] Siddiqi, *Agrarian Unrest in North India*.

[6] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 4.

[7] Unfortunately, Sarkar nowhere elaborates his understanding of the concept of "collective mentality", a concept originally conceived by Marc Bloch and Lucien Febvre and "variably defined as a 'vision of the world' or a 'mode of thought'". (See Harvey J. Kaye, *The British*

the study. The concept can at best be used to grasp the fact that these inter-relations exist, it does not contain within itself the capacity to grasp even the nature or the modalities of the inter-relations, leave alone the nature of the different forms of consciousness. And, above all, there is nothing in the concept which can help to address the problem of transformation of consciousness. Sarkar is of course critical of those "historians (who) often like to demarcate between rival 'trends' of sentiment, thought and action, attributing validity to some and a lower status of 'false consciousness' to others"[8] but he might perhaps concede that the "old" concept of false consciousness, with all its obvious problems, has a greater capacity to identify and analyze those forms of consciousness which are, at least in the historical context of twentieth century India, in obvious need of transformation, than the "new" and more trendy concept of "collective mentality". (I shall return to this argument a little later in Chapter 12 when I elaborate my own alternative hypotheses.) One might confess to a sense of bewilderment or at least surprise that an avowedly radical historiography, which presumably would like to see that the process of subaltern resistance is advanced, has in fact failed to evolve either a methodology or a conceptual framework that could facilitate the process of overcoming or transcending at least those of the limitations or weaknesses of subaltern consciousness that are recognized by it as acting as brakes on the furtherance of this resistance. For example, territoriality and ethnicity are two such limitations identified by Guha, and communal and caste conflict by Sarkar, but neither of them has provided room in his framework for the evolution of a perspective or strategy aimed at the transformation of these elements of subaltern consciousness.[9] In fact, by refusing to attribute greater or lesser validity to different elements of consciousness, Sarkar blocks any such effort.

Thus, whether we take the route suggested by Ranajit Guha's methodology and arrive at a romanticizedversion of "pure" peasant consciousness or whether we use Sarkar's conceptual model and discover that diverse consciousnesses constitute a "collective mentality", we are still without a framework, a methodology, a conceptual model that can enable us to begin

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Marxist Historians: An Introductory Analysis, Cambridge, 1984, p. 224, for a discussion of the concept.) It does not appear to have been used in quite the same way as Sarkar seems to want it used—to study national, regional, class, communal and group consciousness—and it would certainly help if Sarkar indicated the precise manner in which he suggests the concept be used.

[8] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership,* p. 4.

[9] Partha Chatterjee at one point appears to recognize the necessity of transformation of peasant consciousness when he discusses the inability of the new class of sharecroppers in Bengal to articulate their class demands vis-à-vis the rich peasants and *jotedars,* but he fails to really explore the logic of this recognition or evolve a framework on that basis. Chatterjee, *Bengal, 1920–1947*, pp. 199 ff.

to grasp the intricacies of peasant consciousness or consciousnesses in colonial India and the roots of these consciousnesses, a framework that will also simultaneously enable us to address the problem of transformation of these consciousnesses, to assess the weaknesses and strengths of the process of transformation and indicate ways in which the process may be facilitated.

The absence of an adequate existing framework has prompted me to try to set out, in the following pages, what might be described as some elements of an alternative framework. The hypotheses I advance are tentative and are starting points rather than end-products. They have been evolved on the basis of the findings that emerge from my own research on peasant protest in Punjab that has been presented in this work and also on the effort to place these findings in the comparative perspective of contemporaneous peasant movements in other regions of India. The illustrations for the hypotheses have thus been drawn more extensively, but by no means exclusively, from the present work. They are also drawn from the published work of other scholars and from the on-going research of some of my colleagues and myself on the history of the national movement and other popular struggles in colonial India.

I suggest that *one* of the ways in which peasant consciousness can be studied is by examining the demands and issues around which peasant struggles emerged. I also suggest that the issues that formed the focus of struggle were closely linked to certain historically evolved notions of legitimacy.

Peasant Consciousness and the Notion of Legitimacy

An issue or a demand that is potent enough to mobilize the peasantry into protest or revolt is likely to have occupied an important place in the peasants' mind and life. And since "behind every such popular direct action some legitimizing notion of right is to be found",[10] an enquiry into these aspects is likely to tell us something about existing notions of legitimacy in the consciousness of peasants, about which forms of oppression were seen as more galling than others, about which issues were more likely than others to excite overt resistance on the part of the peasants.

In this context, I shall first focus on the peasant movements in late nineteenth- and twentieth-century India in general and Punjab in particular and identify the issues or demands around which they were organized and for which they fought.

[10] E.P. Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, Harmondsworth, 1968, p. 73.

Government taxation emerged as one major issue around which peasant protest surfaced in many parts of India.[11] Peasants sometimes demanded temporary reduction of existing levels of taxation on the ground that crops had failed—the no-revenue movement in Maharashtra which began in 1896–97, and the no-revenue movements of 1899–1900 and 1918 that took place in Kheda District in Gujarat provide ready examples of this. Fall in prices of agricultural produce was another ground on which tax remissions were sought and the best examples of these type of protest are the movements that emerged in many parts of the country in the early 1930s when prices crashed as a result of the Great Depression. At other times peasants resisted "unfair" enhancements in the existing rates of taxation on the ground that these were not based on a correct assessment of the peasants' ability to pay. Resistance around this issue emerged, for example, in Assam in 1893–94, in Gujarat in 1892–1905 and in 1925, in the Bardoli District of Gujarat in 1928, in the Damodar Canal Area of Bengal in 1937–39, in coastal Andhra in 1928–32, in Alwar in 1925, in Tanjore in 1923–24 and the like. Significantly, while peasants demanded reductions and resisted enhancements in levels of taxation, they did not demand abolition of either land revenue or water rates. Demands for abolition were confined to the cesses or additional taxes that were often levied along with the land revenue, such as *chowkidara*, *malba*, or taxes levied by local bodies. Agitations against these kinds of levies surfaced, for example, in north Bihar in the early 1930s, in Midnapore in Bengal in 1921, and again in 1930–31, and in Chirala-Pirala in the Guntur District of coastal Andhra in 1921–22. Temporary refusal to pay land revenue or other taxes was also resorted to for purely political reasons, as a nationalist protest against imperialism (though economic reasons may be a part of it), as in Guntur in 1921–22, in the UP, Gujarat, Bihar, Bengal and coastal Andhra in 1930–31.

In Punjab, government taxation was not just a major issue, but was the focus of an overwhelming proportion of the protest that surfaced in the first half of the twentieth century. Any number of agitations and struggles, big and small, can be listed. The demand for remission or temporary reduction in taxes on the ground that crops had failed was a favourite. Thus, failure of the crop, in this case of cotton, the main commercial crop, in 1905 and 1906, contributed to the discontent that surfaced in 1907 in the Canal Colonies and other districts (see Chapter 1); in 1928, in the months of April and May, the failure of the wheat harvest led to an agitation that resulted in the grant of full remissions to the districts of Lyallpur, Gujranwala, Sheikhupura, Jhang, Gujarat and Montgomery (see Chapter 2). In Lyallpur

[11] I am not giving specific references for the instances of protest mentioned in this section as they are well-known and easily available in a number of general books on the subject, such as, Sunil Sen, *Peasant Movements in India*, Sarkar, *Modern India* and *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, Desai, ed., *Peasant Struggles in India*.

in 1933, in the second quarter of 1937 in Amritsar, Hoshiarpur and some other districts (see Chapter 4), in Amritsar in early 1939, in Lyallpur in July 1939 (see Chapter 5) and in Lyallpur again in December 1939 (see Chapter 6), damage to crops by pests, or hailstorms or failure of rain was at least one of, if not the main ground for demands for remissions.

Demands for remissions in taxation on grounds of fall in prices emerged mainly, as in the rest of the country, in the years of the Great Depression. The agitation on this issue began in November 1930, picked up momentum in March 1931 and continued unabated, despite significant remissions, till the end of the year when the government launched massive repression as part of its crackdown on the second round of the Civil Disobedience Movement. It picked up again in 1933 and continued till 1934. During the Civil Disobedience Movement, when non-payment of revenue was urged mainly on political grounds, as in April–July 1930 and July 1932, the fall of prices leading to inability to pay was also cited as an addition reason for refusal to pay. Most districts of central Punjab, including the canal colony district of Lyallpur, were at one point or another drawn into this agitation. (see Chapters 3 and 4.)

Enhancemant of land revenue as a result of fresh settlements, or even the prospect of an enhancement in a proposed settlement, as well as formal or disguised increases in water rates, all became occasions for protest. Examples are the agitation in 1907 in the canal colonies and in the Lahore and Amritsar districts against the increase in water rates and against the increase in land revenue in Rawalpindi District (see Chapter 1); against water rate enhancement in 1924–25 (see Chapter 2); and against the proposed re-settlement of Amritsar District in early 1930 (see Chapter 3). In Lyallpur, a major agitation lasting from 1933–35 was built up around the on-going resettlement of the district in which the whole system of assessment which was alleged to be weighted against the self-cultivating peasants was questioned, disguised enhancements exposed and changes demanded (see Chapter 4) . In July–August 1938 in Amritsar and from March to September of 1939, in Lahore District, two big *morchas* were organized on the issue of increase of revenue demand by new settlements (see Chapter 5). The disguised increase in water rates that resulted from a reduction in supply of water by remodelling of canal outlets was an issue in the agitations launched in the Lyallpur and Amritsar districts in May–July 1938, in Lahore, Ferozepore, Montgomery, Muzaffargarh and Multan in early 1939 (see Chapter 4), and in the big *morcha* of the post-war years in Amritsar District in July–August 1946 (see Chapter 6).

The demand for abolition of *malba* and *chaukidara*, cesses collected along with the land revenue at the village level, the former to meet common village expenses and the latter to pay for the village watchman, had been voiced for many years repeatedly at almost all peasant meetings and conferences.

In 1938, an agitation on the issue of *malba* developed in the Amritsar, Ludhiana and Hoshiarpur districts, and was given a fillip by an official announcement that payment of *malba* was not obligatory. In 1939, in June and July, in the village of Chuharchak in Ferozepore District, refusal to pay *chowkidara* tax led to a refusal to pay land revenue since the revenue authorities refused to accept land revenue without *chowkidara*. (see Chapter 5.)

While it is evident that protest around the issue of land revenue concerned mainly the self-cultivating peasants who paid land revenue directly to the state, other categories of peasants were also involved. For one, taxes other than land revenue, such as water rates, directly affected tenants as well, as they paid at least a share of these. And further, in some cases, as in parts of Punjab, tenants or sharecroppers even shared the land revenue. There was another direct connection as well between rent and revenue. *Zamindars* or *taluqdars* would only reduce rents if the government reduced the land revenue which *they* had to pay. And conversely, if tenants did not pay rent or paid less rent, *zamindars* pleaded inability to pay the revenue. As in the UP in 1930–31, therefore, no-rent automatically became no-revenue. (This did not apply to the areas of Bengal and Bihar where the land revenue had been settled on a permanent basis since 1793.) Thus, the level of government taxation was an issue that affected many sections of peasants, some more directly and others more indirectly.

The peasants who resisted government attempts to enhance the quantum of the surplus they extracted from them, or those who struggled for a reduction in the government's share when their incomes were reduced, were quite likely deriving their notions of legitimacy, of the justness of their demand, from the long tradition of Indian peasant resistance against government exactions. In earlier times as well, when tax demands became exhorbitant or unbearable, peasants either fled from their old lands to the land of other *zamindars* or rulers who promised them better terms, or, when this became difficult or impossible, rose in revolt, often under *zamindar* leadership.

Migrations by peasants as a form of protest against over-taxation had a known history of at least two millenia. Romila Thapar, for example, cites Kautilya's *Arthashastra* of the early Mauryan period in the third century BC which advises the kings "not to oppress their subjects by over-taxing them lest the latter migrate and thereby erode the prosperity of the king". She also argues that migrations as a means of avoiding heavy taxation occurred in later periods as well, but became more difficult once a hierarchy of intermediary landowners emerged. In this situation peasant revolts became an effective form of protest and she considers that this became evident from at least the sixteenth century. The smaller landowners or *zamindars*, she says, spearheaded some of these revolts because "migration of the peasantry would have undermined the income of such landowners, while those who

espoused the cause of a heavily taxed peasantry would attract discontented peasants".[12]

The scope for migrations as a form of protest also declined and the necessity to resort to revolt increased with the decreasing availability of unsettled but cultivable land.[13] And almost all the peasant revolts in medieval India occurred around the issue of the land revenue demand. To quote Irfan Habib, "peasant uprisings span medieval India; their immediate provocation seems uniformly to have been the demand for payment of land revenue".[14] So resistance to what was perceived as an exorbitant and "unfair" government demand was not new to the Indian peasants, it was part of their history and tradition.

The demand for temporary reduction or remission in taxes when crops failed for any reason or when prices crashed leading to a fall in income was also in consonance with the traditional Indian practice of land revenue being a certain share of the actual production at each harvest, which meant that in a bad year the state's share automatically declined. The British had introduced a new system in which land revenue (and water rates) was fixed in cash for a long period of time—20 or 30 years or even more in practice.[15] Indian peasants, however, had been used to paying, for centuries, a share,

[12] Romila Thapar, "Dissent and Protest in the Early Indian Tradition", *Studies in History*, 1, 2, July–December, 1979, pp. 190–91.

David Hardiman, for example, in his study of the peasants of Gujarat, traces the roots of strategies of resistance such as *hijrat* to the traditional revenue arrangements between rulers and peasants and the forms adopted by peasants for showing their displeasure:

> Traditionally in India, revenue was paid as a result of a contract between the ruler and the peasant. The ruler agreed to protect the peasant and provide grain from his store in bad years. while the peasant agreed to pay a fixed amount of revenue and recognize the political authority of the ruler. In the period before British rule, contracts of this kind were still made on the sparsely populated areas on which peasants had freedom to choose their ruler, such as in the peninsula of Saurashtra.... If the prince or tax farmer broke his word and demanded exorbitant sums of revenue, the village leaders felt justified in refusing it.... However, if high demands continued for too long... they could resort to migration, known as *hijrat*. The village would migrate as a whole to the lands of a more benevolent ruler with whom a fresh and more advantageous agreement could be made.... The weapon of *hijrat* had deep traditional roots. In the Mughal period when revenue demands were erratic but harsh, destitute villagers often fled to escape the payment of revenue.

Peasant Nationalists of Gujarat, pp. 55–57.

[13] In sparsely populated areas, *hijrat* as a form of resistance could continue till much later, as pointed out by Hardiman for the Saurashtra region of Gujarat in the passage cited in the previous footnote. See *Ibid*.

[14] Habib, "The Peasant in Indian History", pp. 59–60.

[15] The differences between pre-British and British systems of land revenue assessment and payment were recognized clearly by the early British revenue officials as were the negative impact of the new systems they introduced, based on fixed cash payment. Many of the early settlements had to be drastically revised downwards because of their disastrous impact. See my *Colonializing Agriculture*, Chapter 1.

even if a high one, of the actual produce and they most likely thought the new system an unjust one and that their demand for adjustment of the revenue demand to the level of the actual production was legitimate.

Besides, even the British land revenue rules did permit remissions in proportion to the degree of shortfall in the harvest. Though revenue officials were generally reluctant to interpret these rules in the peasants' favour, the existence of the rules did mean that agitators could take their stand on the basis of the rules, as was indeed done by Tilak in Maharashtra in 1896–97, Gandhi in Kheda in 1918, the NJBS and other organizations in Punjab in 1928 and by many others on many other occasions. In the case of fall in prices, however, a legalistic argument could not be used and the stand had to be taken on the general obligation of any government to alleviate the distress of its people, to not tax the people so much that their subsistence was threatened.

The Indian case was by no means exceptional. In many other parts of the world, taxes had been the favourite target of protest by peasants. Seventeenth-century French peasants, Chinese peasants throughout their long history, including in the twentieth century, and Vietnamese and Burmese peasants, had all resisted government taxation when it seemed to go beyond "just" limits. They had fled their villages or petitioned or risen in revolt, depending on the conjuncture in which they were placed, as had their Indian counterparts. Further, those under colonial subjection as in Burma or Vietnam had reacted in ways remarkably similar to the Indian peasants, as the disruption caused by colonial systems of taxation was along the same lines as witnessed in India. As James Scott has said most succintly: "Nothing about the colonial order seemed to infuriate the peasantry more than its taxes. One would be hard pressed to find many demonstrations, petitions or rebellions involving the peasantry in which the burdens of taxation were not a prominent grievance." In fact, Scott's account of tax rebellions in the 1930s in south-east Asia, for example, appears at times to have been lifted straight from the Indian experience, down to the last detail about resistance to the salt tax—the only major difference being the head tax, which was not found in India.[16] The salt tax, in fact, appears to have been almost universally resented by peasants. In 1789, for example, it appeared at the head of the list of taxes that were considered undesirable by French peasants.[17] In India, as we know, Gandhiji fashioned his whole

[16] James C. Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant,* Haven and London, 1976, p. 91 and chapters 4 and 5. For China, see Bianco, "Peasants and Revolution", pp. 314–16. Rodney Hilton argues that even for artisans and other members of the lower classes in the towns in medieval Europe, taxation was the principal issue of grievance and revolt. See his "Unjust Taxation and Popular Resistance", *New Left Review,* No. 180, March–April 1990.

[17] See John Markoff, "Peasants Protest: The Claims of Lord, Church, and State in the *Cahiers de doleances* of 1789", *Comparative Studies in Society and History,* 32, 3, July 1990, especially Table 1.

strategy of struggle against the British Empire in 1930 around the salt laws. It is surprising indeed that commentators on peasant resistance and consciousness have tended to miss the universality of the peasant sense of grievance about this tax on a daily necessity.

The other demand that became the focus of protest for and directly involved virtually all sections of peasants, including the tribals, was for the scaling down of debt and the curtailment of the power of the moneylenders. Peasants resisted in various ways the moneylenders' tendency to charge exorbitant interest rates, to enter false sums in their accounts, to take control over their land on the plea of non-payment of interest, etc. They demanded "fair" rates of interest, restrictions on the moneylenders' right to alienate the peasants' land, proper accounts and even debt conciliation boards that would arbitrate between debtor and creditor. Examples of discontent and agitation on these issues are so pervasive as to be almost redundant.

The better-known instances, however, are the Deccan Riots of 1875 in Maharashtra, the agitation for relief from increased burden of indebtedness and/or return of lands alienated to moneylenders as a consequence of crashing prices during the Depression, which took place in almost all parts of the country in the 1930s and especially in coastal Andhra, Bihar, Bengal, Kerala, the UP and Punjab, and the demand for restoration of alienated lands that merged as part of the Telengana Movement in the state of Hyderabad in 1946–48.

In Punjab, consciousness on the issue of debt was particularly high due to the official and Unionist anti-moneylender rhetoric and because of the operation of the Punjab Land Alienation Act and also because of the spate of debt legislation in the mid and late 1930s. In 1915, there had been widespread riots against moneylenders in the districts of Jhang, Multan and Muzaffargarh in which wheat stocks of moneylenders had been looted and debt bonds burnt. Heavy repression including forcing peasants to sign fresh debt bonds had been used to quell the riots, which were occasioned by a sharp rise in the price of wheat at the commencement of the First World War.[18] The impact of the Depression was felt in the agitation that peaked in 1935–36 for a reduction in and even a moratorium on debts and which found expression in the mushrooming of *karza* or debt committees in many districts of central Punjab. (see Chapter 4.)

The legitimacy for anti-moneylender protest was obviously derived from the fact that moneylenders in pre-colonial India never had the kind of power they acquired as a result of the new British legal system. They were under the control of the village community and could only claim customary interest on loans advanced; there is no evidence of their being able to or wanting to acquire the peasants' land. Customary practice as well as abundance of

[18] See Master Hari Singh, *Punjab Peasant in Freedom Struggle*, p. vii.

land available for cultivation prevented such practices on the part of the moneylenders. Therefore, the moneylenders' new insistence on land transfer in lieu of debt repayment and their charging of exorbitant rates of interest, as well as their use of the courts to enforce their claims, was seen by peasants as a violation of traditional norms and thus illegitimate.

It also needs to be emphasized that protest against moneylenders undoubtedly received encouragement from British official attitudes. While it was colonial revenue policies and tenurial arrangements combined with the wider processes of commercialization, deindustrialization, etc., that pushed the peasants into the arms of the moneylenders, it was obviously expedient for the colonial rulers to direct attention away from themselves and identify the moneylenders as the cause of the peasants' distress—a task they performed with great dexterity.[19] Thus, while demands for reform of the system of land revenue or of tenancy were usually ignored till they reached a deafening roar, anti-moneylender whispers were clearly audible and quickly got transformed into anti-moneylender legislation. The Punjab Land Alienation Act of 1900 stands as a unique testimony to official concern for the peasants: it was passed without any "pressure from below", no revolt, not even an agitation, was in evidence! The success that attended the anti-moneylender protests of the peasants tended, therefore, to be greater than that achieved by other varieties of protest. Nor was it always proportionate to the vehemence of the protest.

Another category of issues around which resistance emerged related specifically to those peasants who cultivated land as tenants of landlords. Those who already had occupancy rights under the law resisted landlords' attempts at curtailing those rights and increasing the rent burden. Peasant resistance in Bengal in the 1870s and early 1880s which culminated in the Bengal Tenancy (Amendment) Act of 1885 belonged to this category. In the struggle for *bakasht* lands in Bihar in the 1930s, ex-occupancy tenants demanded restoration of occupancy rights. Others, whose traditional claims to occupancy had not been recognized, pressed for recognition of those claims and for restrictions on the landlords' arbitrary right to enhancement of rents. The peasant movement in the UP, 1919–22, the anti-zamindari struggles in Andhra in the 1930s, and the peasant movement in Malabar in the 1930s were organized around this type of demands. Both these

[19] Wadhawa Ram, the ex-*patwari* who became a leader of the tenants of the canal colonies, describing his experiences as a school boy, which would be sometime in the late 1920s or early 1930s, said that the village school would organize dramatic performances, with school boys as the actors, in which the dominant theme would be anti-*bania*, that is, against the non-agriculturist caste, merchant moneylenders (interview). If we remember that these were government-run schools and that the government exercised very strict control over the curriculum and activities permitted in the schools, it is obvious that these dramatic performances could not have taken place without official sanction and encouragement.

categories also resisted the landlords' tendency to pile on illegal cesses and *abwabs* and to demand forced labour or *begar*. This was true of the Bengal peasant movement of the 1870s and 1880s as well as of the UP peasant movement of 1919–22 and the Malabar and Andhra movements of the 1930s. High caste tenants who had traditionally enjoyed preferential rent rates were also annoyed by the landlords' increasing desire to curtail their customary privileges. The Awadth *taluqdars* or landlords were particularly noted for this practice in the latter half of the nineteenth-century and the first two decades of the twentieth-century. The only category of tenants who demanded that they be given full ownership rights over the land they cultivated were those who had lost their lands to either landlords or moneylenders in fairly recent memory and who therefore regarded themselves as the rightful and legitimate owners of those lands. The struggle in 1946–48 of those Telengana peasants who had been deprived of their lands by *deshmukhs*, moneylenders, etc., belonged to this type. Their struggle was for restoration of proprietory rights in land that had once belonged to them and their ancestors—they did *not* claim the land on the basis that they were the actual cultivators, that is, they were not operating with the consciousness of "land to the tiller".

Examples from Punjab are available only for this last type—the demand for full proprietory rights by tenants who had a memory of being peasant proprietors. The movements of the *muzaras* in Patiala (see Chapter 7), the tenants in Una tehsil in Hoshiarpur District and the tenants of the Sodhi landlords in Ferozepore District (see Chapter 6), all belonged to this category. Occupancy tenants in Punjab were very few and paid only a small *malikana* fee to the superior owners and functioned in practice virtually as full owners of their land. There was no sign of any protest on their part. Tenants-at-will were, in Punjab, mostly sharecroppers and their demands and struggles will be discussed separately later.

Tenant-cultivators who demanded occupancy rights, or limitations on rent, or those who refused to pay the extra, illegal cesses that landlords forced on them, were also acting in consonance with their historically evolved notions of their legitimate rights. In pre-colonial India, for various reasons, occupancy rights were rarely denied to the cultivator as long as he paid the taxes that were due from him. The *zamindars* or other revenue-collectors or landowners seldom asserted ownership rights over land by evicting existing cultivators. Also, if their demands became too exorbitant, given the favourable land–man ratio that existed in pre-colonial India, the cultivator could often flee to another place and even seek the protection of another zamindar. But with the increasing structuring of the pattern of colonial underdevelopment, with deindustrialization and the increasingly unfavourable land–man ratio, these options began to get closed. The *zamindars*, now turned landlords, also began to press their advantage by

evicting cultivators, increasing rents, charging new fees and cesses. The change was facilitated often by the entry of new men from the towns into the ranks of *zamindars*. "New" landlords were less sensitive to ties of reciprocity that were an important component of traditional paternalistic ideology and thus were more prone to violate old customary codes in this respect. This new landlord *avatar* of the *zamindar* or revenue collector, often absentee, did not quite conform to the peasants' traditional image of their *zamindar* and they resisted his encroachment on their traditional and customary rights and his assertion of new rights or claims. Therefore, while they did not question his right to claim a "legitimate" or "just" share of their produce or income which they had been long accustomed to yielding to him or his predecessors, they did question the "legitimacy" or "justness" of his new claims and often resisted his efforts to press those claims.[20]

Similarly, when some peasants were arbitrarily deprived of their recognized property rights, either through landlord–official collusion as in Patiala (see Chapter 7) and Telengana or via government land revenue settlement policies as in Una Tehsil in Punjab or because landlord–moneylenders insisted on land transfer in lieu of debt claims as in Telengana in the 1930s, the demand for restoration of these lands emerged. This demand emerged especially sharply when the "memory" of expropriation was still fresh, or when an old "memory" had been kept alive through a religious tradition as by the Sodhis' tenants in Punjab (see Chapter 6), and in situations where these peasants could see their own kinsmen and caste-fellows in their own villages or in neighbouring villages still enjoying full proprietary rights, thus confirming the "memory" and keeping it alive.[21] The reduction in their status from landowning peasants to landless tenant cultivators was particularly irksome because, as in Patiala, their own kinsmen and caste-fellows in the locality would refuse to give their women in marriage to them and otherwise consider them inferior in status (see Chapter 7). Nor could they find any rationale for their existing status in tradition or customary practice. The moneylenders' insistence on land transfer in lieu of debt repayment, as already discussed earlier, was seen by peasants as a violation of traditional norms and thus illegitimate. In a similar vein, the Patiala *biswedars* and Telengana *jagirdars'* violation of existing forms of

[20] Rodney Hilton shows how many of the peasant movements of the late medieval age in Europe were peasant reactions to attempts by the feudal ruling classes to alter the customary relationships to the detriment of the peasants as a whole. They resisted this change because they could not "accept the abandonment of traditional roles by any one of the orders of the society—whose basic structure they [did] not, to begin with, challenge." Rodney Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free: Medieval Peasant Movements and the English Rising of 1381,* London, 1977, pp. 118–19.

[21] For a discussion of peasant "memory", see Rodney Hilton, *A Medieval Society: The West Midlands at the End of the Thirteenth Century,* Cambridge, 1983, p. 154.

behaviour by fraudulently acquiring property rights in the peasants' land by manipulating their influence with the administration was clearly seen as illegitimate and unjust. Thus, their own memory of their earlier status as well as the visible continuation of that status in the case of their own kinsmen and caste-fellows who continued to retain their lands, convinced the dispossessed peasants of the legitimacy of their claims and strengthened their resolve to fight for their acceptance. They struggled not because they had acquired a modern anti-feudal consciousness and wanted abolition of the system of landlordism, but for restoration of their lost rights in land.[22]

The movements of sharecroppers or *adhiars* or *bargadars* or *bataidars* mainly emerged around the demands for abolition of or reduction in illegal cesses and *abwabs*, and/or for reduction of the landlords' share, around the refusal to carry the landlord's share to his godown or the insistence that the produce be stored, before division, in their godown. There is little evidence of the emergence of a strong demand for the grant of a legal security of tenure or occupancy right, such as one might expect from tenants of this category, though there are some instances of resistance to evictions.

The most well-known example of this category of protest is the Tebhaga Movement in Bengal in 1946–47 in which the main issues were the reduction of the *jotedar's* share from one-half to one-third of the produce, the refusal of the *bargadars* to stock the produce in the *jotedar's khamar* or godown and refusal to pay the *hat tola* or market cess levied by the landlords on peasants who came to attend the weekly market. In Punjab, the most significant example is of the movement of the *adhiars* or *bataidars* of the canal colony areas of Nili Bar, Montgomery and Multan that emerged in 1938–39 and was resumed in 1946–47 (see Chapters 5 and 6). The main issues in this case were a refusal to pay extra cesses or levies heaped on the tenants on any pretext, over and above the customary half-share and an insistence that the produce be split into half in the field itself—hence the slogan: *banne ute adho adh* (which literally means "half and half on the boundary of the field")—and be carried to the landlords' godowns at their own expense. Other examples are of much smaller struggles: such as the one launched by tenants of the Skinner's Estate in Hissar in 1929 and 1930 (see Chapters 2 and 3), which emerged on the issue of refusal to render *begar* or unpaid labour and services or supply goods at less than market prices and later also included a resistance to ejectments and a demand for reduction

[22] The Russian peasantry, too, seems to have behaved in a similar fashion. Describing the seizure of land during the Russian Revolution of 1917, Maynard, a member of Indian Civil Service belonging to the Punjab cadre, writes that "there was, paradoxically, a certain system, even a certain order, in the proceedings. Peasants did not seize the land which had not been cultivated by them or their forbears." Sir John Maynard, *Russia in Flux,* New York, 1962, p. 332, cited in Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution", p. 682.

of rent; and the struggle in 1946 in Chotala, again in Hissar District, against arbitrary evictions and *begar* and for reduction of the landlords' share from one-half to one-third; and the struggle in 1946 against evictions on the estate of the Nawab of Mamdot in Ferozepore District (see Chapter 6).

Struggles for improvement of sharecropping terms only emerged in those areas or pockets where the land of big landlords or lease-holding companies was cultivated by large bodies of landless tenants-at-will. They did not emerge in areas where, though a large portion of the land was cultivated on sharecropping terms, as in Jullundur District where the figure reached almost 50 per cent, it was cultivated predominantly by landowning peasants with insufficient land who took on extra land on sharecropping terms to enlarge their operational holding, or who exchanged inconveniently located plots with fellow landowning peasants. Such peasants neither saw themselves as sharecroppers nor were they victims of oppressive cesses and levies and other discriminatory behaviour as was the case with the landless tenants of large landlords.[23] Landless tenants or sharecroppers, that is, pure tenants, in predominantly peasant-owned villages were generally too few in number[24] and, like the agricultural labourers or *kamins*, too much under the hegemony of the landowning peasant community to organize any resistance. Nor, it must be noted, did landowners in peasant villages extract feudal levies or take *begar* from landless tenants in the manner of big landlords in landlord-dominated areas.[25]

[23] See my *Colonializing Agriculture*, Chapter 4. Master Hari Singh, Harkishen Singh Surjeet and Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, three of the major organizers of the peasant movement in Punjab, pointed out that while they were fully aware of the existence of tenancy in central Punjab districts, the nature of tenancy was entirely different from that in the big landlord-dominated areas of western Punjab and parts of the canal colonies. Here, in central Punjab, it was mostly either peasants with extra land giving out a few acres of land on rent and those with small holdings taking on a few more acres or small landowners renting out land to other small peasants. They were all categorical that the question of organizing any struggle in such an area on the question of tenancy did not arise (interviews). We might recall that Wolf, too, mentions the fact that "a peasant may be at one and the same time owner, renter, sharecropper, laborer" as one of the constraints on the emergence of peasant protest. Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, pp. 289–90.

[24] For example, in village Suner in Ferozepore District, there were only three landless tenants out of a total of 102 tenants. In Tehong in Jullundur District, where 60 per cent of the land was cultivated on tenancy terms, only four tenants were landless. See my *Colonializing Agriculture*, Chapter 59. While tenancy was as disastrous in its impact on agricultural productivity in these areas as it was in big landlord pockets, for investment tended to stay off rented land, the implications of the lack of sharp class cleavages in central Punjab were very significant for the issue of struggle. This also meant that, in the long run, the solutions could not be found for the problem of tenancy through land-to-the-tiller-based land reform but had to be much more complex. The solutions would have to—and in post-Independence Punjab did—include increasing the viability of small peasant farming, raising productivity, introducing multi-cropping and the like that could absorb more labour, increasing the scope for off-farm employment so that the extra population could be absorbed outside the village, etc.

[25] Interview with Master Hari Singh.

Thus, tenants-at-will cultivating on share-cropping terms often demonstrated a strong resistance to the landlords' attempts to take more than their agreed or customary share by levying extra cesses or by extracting free labour and services, or by getting their produce carried free of charge. They also on occasion resisted arbitrary evictions, especially when these were a part of the repression launched against their struggles. It appears, then, that they saw these practices as illegitimate and resistance to them as justified. However, it also appears, then, that sharecroppers did not have in their consciousness a similar strong sense or notion of legitimate right to occupancy of the land they cultivated. Their struggles, even in their most militant phases, reveal hardly any glimmerings of such a consciousness. In Bengal, for example, it is only in the 1970s and 1980s that sharecroppers or *bargadars* began to move towards getting security of tenure via the process of registration that was initiated by the Left Front Government of West Bengal. Even at the height of the Tebhaga Movement in 1946–47, the demand for security of tenure was not a part of its focus.

As a tentative answer, one might advance the hypothesis that one reason why sharecroppers did not reveal a consciousness of a right even to the continued occupancy, let alone ownership, of the land they cultivated was because they did not have strong traditional or customary rights in land. It appears that sharecroppers often emerged from those strata of the low-caste (and tribal) population that did not form part of the village brotherhood of the dominant landowning castes. In central Punjab, for example, many sharecroppers were recruited from the *kamins* or low-caste village servants. In the canal colonies of Nili Bar and Montgomery, they were often Rai Sikhs and Kambohs, castes lower down in the hierarchy, at the top of which was the dominant landowning caste of Jats. Even if these castes had some claim to land in their home districts, they certainly did not assert any claim to the land they had recently started cultivating as sharecroppers in the Montgomery and Nili Bar colonies. There is also evidence of Jat cultivators in Punjab refusing to cultivate on sharecropping terms as they considered it beneath their dignity to have the landowner either interfering in production decisions or supervising the sharing out of the harvest. All this indicates that perhaps it was usually members of the lower castes and untouchables that took to cultivation on a sharecropping basis and since, unlike the clearly landowning castes, their traditional claim to land was not very clear or strong, their notions of legitimacy did not include a right to the ownership of the land or even to its occupancy. Perhaps they did not see themselves in the way that Jats in Punjab, or Jats in Haryana, or Kammas and Reddys in Andhra or Kunbis in Maharashtra or Patidars in Gujarat saw themselves—as traditional landowning castes.

Support for this hypothesis is also provided by the fact that tenants-at-will often failed to retain land that they had sometimes occupied in the

course of struggle. This happened, for example, in Patiala, where occupancy tenants, who had a strong feeling that the *biswedars*' claim on the land was fraudulent, succeeded in retaining occupation of the land in the face of repression when president's rule was established in 1953, but tenants-at-will, who had occupied land at the height of the movement during 1949–52 when the administrative structure was weak, and landlords had fled the villages, failed to retain their new found rights in the face of repression.[26] Similarly, it appears that even within the tenants-at-will, those belonging to castes at the lower end of the hierarchy had a lesser sense of right to land than those who were placed a few rungs higher. Ruldu Khan, a veteran Communist leader, who was for years the major figure in the agricultural labourers' movement in post-Independence Punjab, who was an activist in the Ferozepore tenants' struggles in the post-war years, and himself came from a low-caste family, recounted at length how the lowest castes, or Harijans, who constituted the majority of the tenants-at-will in the landlord areas of Ferozepore, were the major victims of evictions that took place as a result of the landlord's attempts to come to terms with and reduce the impact of the tenancy and land ceiling legislation of the 1950s.[27] "In my estimate", he said, "75 per cent of the tenants-at-will as a whole were evicted and only 25 per cent retained the land. Among these, Harijans, who were the majority, in 80–85 per cent of the cases, failed to keep the land. Around 50 per cent of the Rai Sikhs (who were the next highest on the caste ladder), managed to get the land. And of the Kambohs, who originally had the smallest presence among the tenants-at-will, almost 90 per cent succeeded in retaining the land".[28] Significantly, Kambohs, though not a dominant agricultural caste like the Jats, were landowning peasants in many pockets in Punjab and even constituted the majority of peasants in some areas, as, for example, in the state of Kapurthala.[29]

[26] To quote G.S. Randhawa, who worked among the Patiala tenants in this phase: "As for tenants-at-will, we knew that our movement was very weak among them, and therefore, when the question came of distributing the occupied land of landlords who had abandoned their lands and fled to the towns, we gave this occupied land (the landlord's self-cultivated land, not that which occupancy tenants already cultivated) to tenants-at-will." But once president's rule was imposed, tenancy legislation enabling occupancy tenants and tenants-at-will to become full owners by paying compensation amounting to 12 times and 90 times the land revenue passed and simultaneously a tough line taken against illegal occupation, "what happened was that many tenants-at-will, who had occupied land under our inspiration, could not retain those lands" (interview). This was confirmed by others.

[27] See Chapter 7, Section VIII, and especially footnotes 380 and 386 for the tenancy and land ceiling legislation passed in 1953 and 1954.

[28] Interview with Ruldu Khan.

[29] See Sir Denzil Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes,* New Delhi, 1974, pp. 201–202. This is a reprint of the original published in 1916, which itself was a reprint of a chapter of the report written by Ibbetson on the Punjab census of 1881, which was published in 1883.

Of course, this was not merely a consequence of their own perception of their rights, but also of others' conceptions about them, which were, though, heavily influenced by their caste status. Ruldu Khan explained that one reason why Kambohs succeeded in getting most of the land was that the process through which this occurred was tilted in their favour. Landlords acting under pressure of the tenancy laws entered into agreements with tenants by which tenants surrendered part of the land and paid some compensation for securing property rights in the rest. They were more willing to make these arrangements with Kambohs, who were reputed to be good cultivators, thrifty and industrious and therefore they had greater faith in their capacity and inclination to pay the instalments of compensation. Similar faith was obviously not reposed in the Harijans.[30]

The few examples that are available of resistance on the part of agricultural labourers, the vast majority of whom belonged to the "untouchable" castes, and in some cases to tribal groups, considered outside the caste hierarchy, too, did not reflect any existence of or emergence of a consciousness of the right to land. Centuries of custom, sanctioned by religion, had denied them the right, in most parts of the country, to even think of owning or cultivating their own land.[31] No sanction could be found in this long history for the emergence of a consciousness that this denial was illegitimate and a demand for land was legitimate. Unless this consciousness was transformed and a new consciousness based on a new notion of legitimacy created, such a demand could not become the focus of the agricultural labourers' struggle. Even struggles for increase in wages were hardly in evidence, except in pockets in coastal Andhra and later, after 1947, in Telengana. Their consciousness of their rights does not therefore appear to have been much more than a consciousness of a right to subsistence. Their participation in food riots and looting of bazaars and granaries in times of scarcity or high food prices falls clearly within the parameters of asserting a right to subsistence.

An explanation for the stark reality of the paucity, amounting to almost an absence, of examples of protest from among agricultural labourers can perhaps be sought in the weakness of any tradition of resistance and in the lack of space provided in pre-modern or traditional ideologies in India for any sanctions for such resistance. Romila Thapar, for example, in her discussion of dissent and protest in early Indian tradition,[32] after discussing

[30] Interview with Ruldu Khan.

[31] See Habib, "The Peasant in Indian History". There were some exceptions to this rule, as for example, the Satnamis in the Central Provinces, the Ezhavas in Kerala and possibly others elsewhere; probably caused by local ecological and demographic, and possibly also social and cultural factors. But the dominant picture is that of landlessness accompanying untouchable and low-caste status.

[32] All the references in this paragraph and the next one are from Thapar, "Dissent and Protest in the Early Indian Tradition", pp. 191–92.

the forms adopted by peasants in their protest against high taxes, pointedly contrasts this with the fact that "little is said in the early sources about dissidence or protest among the socially excluded groups.... There are, in contrast to classical Roman times, no records of large-scale slave revolts.... The excluded groups tend to remain excluded in the ideologies of all dissenters.... Even the rationalists, while they do not condemn the excluded groups, do not claim them as part of their audience or encourage opposition to authority among these groups". She further goes on to say that millenarian movements, through which socially excluded groups sometimes express their protest, are common in the Semitic religions but are barely evident within the indigenous religious traditions of India. Even the couple of instances of millenarian ideas that are available in the Indian tradition reflect the aspirations of those groups that had lost power and wanted to regain it and do not relate to the socially excluded groups.

She further argues that in the Indian tradition, because of the logic of caste society in which the non-observance of caste norms would otherwise have resulted in ostracism and low status, the effective questioning of or breaking away from caste obligations occurred at times without number via the formation of a religious sect, which could legitimize the breaking of caste rules. This also meant, however, that dissent was thus diverted into the formation of a parallel society rather than leading to a strengthening of confrontation within the system. And the parallel society also provided a mechanism for caste orthodoxy to accommodate this dissent since the parallel system impinged upon but did not disrupt society. Besides, even those sects which began by cutting across caste ties would, with the weakening of their dissent and in the process of building institutional bases, tend to work within the confines of caste contours. More importantly for our present concerns, she states that "in the competition for status, even among parallel systems, *the socially excluded groups were only marginally involved and were often left to their own resources for mobilising dissent*" (emphasis added).

Romila Thapar's arguments have been cited here at great length because they are particularly illuminating in the specific context of our more immediate concern: Punjab. The difficulty in finding examples of protest among agricultural labourers even in areas which otherwise had a vigorous peasant movement and where Sikhism, with its egalitarian and anticaste ideology, might be expected to provide a source of legitimacy for ideas of resistance, suggests that at least some elements of an explanation could be found by pursuing Thapar's line of reasoning. It is a fact that Sikhism's initial egalitarian thrust had been considerably blunted over the centuries and caste was as alive and kicking among the Sikhs as it was among Hindus (and Muslims).[33] It is well-known that untouchable Sikhs of

[33] This is well-known, but if corroboration is needed, Ibbetson, *Punjab Castes*, provides enough proof.

the chuhra caste were popularly called Mazhabi or Mazbi Sikhs, meaning that they were Sikhs only by religion, and not real Sikhs, that is Jats or Khatris, the two high castes among the Sikhs. Untouchable Sikhs were as much victims of untouchability as Hindu *chuhras* or sweepers.[34]

Thus, while Sikhism could and did provide a source for legitimizing resistance among the higher peasant castes such as Jats, it did not prove a similar source for the low caste Sikh agricultural labourers. The fact that caste taboos against working as agricultural labourers were very strong, and therefore even poor Jat peasants who lost most or all of their land and were forced into labour preferred to work as coolies in the town rather than do wage labour in the village, meant that any permeation of ideologies or traditions of resistance from this source into the world of the agricultural labourers would not occur. (See my *Colonializing Agriculture*, Chapter 4). It is not unlikely that if a significant number of higher caste peasants, with a stronger consciousness of their rights and a sense of having lost their land and status, had entered the ranks of the wage labourers, there might have been a stronger impetus to protest.[35]

Nor do we find Islam, another religion with supposedly egalitarian possibilities, providing in Punjab the basis for any resistance or protest among Muslim agricultural labourers (or even among Muslim tenants or peasants). On the contrary, the big Muslim landlords, concentrated in western Punjab and parts of the canal colonies, successfully used religion and clan loyalties to subvert any possibilities of resistance or protest.

Additional support for Thapar's thesis is provided by an example discussed in Chapter 2 in which an untouchable caste group refused to perform their traditional occupation of skinning dead animals, leading to a confrontation in which the dominant landowning peasants used the weapon of social boycott, traditionally used to enforce compliance with caste norms, to break their resistance. What is important is that this resistance was offered by a group that owed allegiance to the Balmiki religious sect, and it is from this identity that they could derive the legitimacy for their actions.

[34] Again, this is well-known, but a quote from Ibbetson may help: "A Mazbi will often have been returned [in the Census] as Chuhra by caste and Sikh by religion.... Mazbi means nothing more than a member of the scavenger class converted to Sikhism.... And though [Mazbis are] good Sikhs so far as religious observance is concerned, the taint of hereditary pollution is upon them; and Sikhs of other castes refuse to associate with them even in religious ceremonies." *Ibid.*, p. 294.

[35] In other countries, where the non-existence of the caste system has meant that these kinds of divisions were absent among peasants and a specific category was not debarred from being landowning peasants, agricultural labourers have emerged as a distinct category only with the onset of capitalism or capitalist-colonialism and they have emerged from the ranks of peasants who earlier at least had claims to occupancy of land. This has probably been a factor enabling the emergence of stronger movements of protest among agricultural labour in these countries as compared to the Indian case.

The Balmiki sect, as is well known, is spread over various parts of north India and comprises mostly members of the lower and untouchable castes and its teachings question various tenets of the caste system.

However, the general weakness of protest among the lower, especially untouchable castes, even on social issues such as untouchability, could at least partly be a result of the fact that these disabilities did not assume in Punjab the extreme and repugnant form in which they were found in some other parts of the country, such as in Kerala, where even the sight of an untouchable was polluting, or even other parts of south and west India and in Bengal where the hold of Brahminical orthodoxy was much stronger than it had been for centuries in Punjab. In this respect, Sikhism and Islam had obviously had their impact, as had the fact that Punjab lay on the route of continuous foreign influences that came via traders and conquerors and marauders who passed through it on their way to the heart of Hindustan.

However, this does not mean that scope did not exist, for it existed in plenty, for efforts to build up, amongst the landless lower castes, a new consciousness and resistance based on the consciousness of the injustice of the prevailing social and economic system. It is true, however, that given the state of their existing consciousness about their rights and the weakness of any traditions of protest, and given their extreme economic vulnerability, there was no guarantee of easy or quick success, or even of success itself. But tragically, the direness of the necessity was matched by the paucity of effort in this direction.

Sadly, even the Communists, armed with all their theory about the proletariat, had little time for this centuries-old proletariat, for, without a strong tradition of resistance or a strong sense of being "wronged", this most deprived section of society could hardly qualify as candidates for the militant economic struggles that Communists were on the look-out for. The Communists' obsession with "struggle", and that too *economic* struggle, blinded them to the possibilities offered by social disabilities as well as to the necessity for non-struggle-oriented political work that could introduce new elements into the traditional consciousness of socially deprived groups and gradually lead them to the path of struggle, economic or otherwise.

Significantly, these possibilities were first perceived by Gandhiji at a national plane and explored by Gandhian political workers in Punjab. It was Gandhians, organized in the Punjab Achhut Udhhar Mandal, who tried to spread consciousness among the village *kamins* or low caste artisans and agricultural labourers about their legal right to refuse *begar* (see Chapter 2, Section III). It was the Gandhians, who again tried to raise the issue of the manner in which the Punjab Land Alienation Act, though supposedly designed to exclude moneylenders from acquiring agricultural land, had defined "agriculturist castes" (who had a right to purchase and own land)

in such a way that it excluded the labouring agriculturist castes. A traditional disability, existing only in custom and fact, was thus given a legal status and made a barrier to any future change. Further, as pointed out by the Punjab Achhut Udhhar Mandal, this even expropriated the *kamins* from their dwelling-sites, to which they had a customary right and thus further reduced their status. The Mandal demanded that at least this disability should be removed and *kamins* be considered as *de facto* owners of dwelling-sites and houses in which they had resided continuously for 12 years. (see Chapter 2, Section III.)

It is significant for the purposes of our discussion on consciousness that the Gandhians pushed with greater vehemence the demand for right to dwelling-sites than the demand for right to own land. The former was more likely of greater immediate appeal as it was in consonance with customary notions of rights among the group whose cause they were espousing. Balwant Singh Azad, a peasant activist of Amritsar District, himself born in a landless family of Dahi Khartis, a low artisan caste, mentioned the grant of house-sites of 5 *marlas* each of land to all the non-Jats in his village at the time of *chakbandi* or consolidation of land which occurred in the post-Independence years, as a major achievement and said that this was possible only because non-Jats were in a majority in his village.[36] It is worthwhile remembering that even in the 1970s, when Prime Minister Indira Gandhi formulated programmes for the landless rural poor, the grant of house-sites was an important item and it continues to be a popular item in the anti-poverty programmes even today. The reason for this is that a legal *patta* or right to the house-sites takes away from the landowning community one major weapon they can use in their struggle against the landless poor: threat to turn them out of the village by depriving them of their customary (but not legal) right to live in the village.

But the question still remains: why do we not find in Punjab examples of resistance based on the notion of right to subsistence which we have recognized earlier as a constituent of the consciousness of the agricultural labouring castes. Why are there hardly any examples (the anti-moneylender riots of 1915 being the one exception) of food riots, looting of granaries and markets? Part of the reason may of course be inadequate research and the lower visibility of small, local-level protests. Another part of the answer can probably be located in the economic context outlined in my *Colonializing Agriculture*, Chapter 4.

To recapitulate very briefly, agricultural labourers in Punjab do not appear to have faced, for most of the first half of the twentieth-century, any serious threats to their subsistence. On the contrary, due to a variety of reasons, such as their comparatively smaller numbers, the increase in employment opportunities in the army, in the towns, in the canal colonies, their real wages tended to at least remain stable over much of the period

[36] Interview with Balwant Singh Azad.

and even increase in some years. Periods of fall in real wages happened to coincide with increases in employment and *vice versa*, the two trends thus compensating for each other. Further, the changes in the *sepidari* system, the traditional mode of payment by way of a share of the product of the village, were not uniformly disadvantageous to the *kamins*, and were at least partly a consequence of the greater mobility and employment opportunities available to the latter. Further, the evidence suggests that at least in central Punjab and the canal colonies, where agricultural labourers were in short supply, employers were unable to force them to shift to modes of payment of their choice, such as from kind to cash when prices were rising and from cash to kind when prices fell. The bargaining position of agricultural labourers thus appears to have been quite strong and the picture that emerges is not one of any grave threat to their subsistence.

Thus, the absence of protest based on existing, traditional notions of legitimacy such as the right to subsistence can perhaps be explained by the absence of serious threats to subsistence, whereas the weakness of protest based on new notions of rights and legitimacy was a product of weak efforts in the direction. The general weakness of protest as a whole was in consonance with the nation-wide trend and its roots lie deep in custom and tradition, as do the roots of the kind of protest voiced by the Balmikis. To shake those old roots and send down new ones required a tremendous effort and a complexity of understanding of "tradition" and "modernity" and of the transition from one to the other, that only Gandhiji, among his contemporaries, showed any comprehension of. Others, even those possessed with far more "sophisticated" ideologies and equal commitment to the deprived, largely left the poorest of the poor to fend for themselves as best as they could.

In Gandhiji's understanding, the untouchables first needed to be given a sense of their own dignity as human beings by the removal of caste disabilities through temple entry, inter-dining, removal of association of "degrading" and "unclean" occupations such as scavenging and carrying night-soil with certain castes, etc., and also through economic uplift, before they could be expected to participate in the political life of the country. In his understanding these sections had been so oppressed by the rest of society that it was now the turn of the latter to take upon itself the task of their uplift and they should not even be expected to be able to contribute anything in political terms to the struggle for freedom. The burden of the fight for freedom was to be carried by those who were capable of shouldering the burden. In line with the logic of his thought, he initiated country-wide programmes in this direction and also brought upon himself major attacks from Hindu orthodoxy. His differences with Ambedkar on the whole issue of how to handle the problems of the "Depressed Classes", as they were then called, also bring out his perspective of the necessity to pose a challenge

to the orthodox Hindu order from within, making Hindus accommodate, even in the legislatures, untouchables from within their own quota, rather than treating them as a separate category. Looked at in this perspective, Ambedkar's solution, was, in fact in keeping with the traditional form of resistance where dissenters formed a sect *outside* the Hindu social order, rather than challenge it from within, which is what Gandhiji wanted to do.[37]

The issues which formed the focus of tribal resistance mainly related to encroachments on their traditional way of life—they resisted government attempts to curtail their traditional rights to the use of the forest and to impose exorbitant tax demands, they revolted against non-tribals who were seeking to make them tenants on their own land and generally they resisted all the forces that sought to erode the relative autonomy that they had enjoyed for the past many centuries. Some of the more well-known tribal movements are the Santhal uprising of 1855, Birsa Munda's revolt in Chhota Nagpur in 1899–1900, the Gudem Rampa rebellions of the nineteenth century and Sita Ram Raju's rebellion in 1922–24 in Andhra, the *Varlis* struggle of 1945–48 in Maharashtra and so on. There are no examples from Punjab, since there was no tribal belt in the province. Unlike other groups at the lowest rungs of the social order, such as agricultural labourers, the tribals' long tradition of relative autonomy and the solidarity provided by the relatively egalitarian structure of their social organization, enabled the tribals to often offer determined and united resistance to encroachments on their customary style of life.

This entire discussion of the nature of demands and the consciousness reflected in them can be illustrated with reference to the Telengana struggle in which almost all these issues came up in one form or another. In Telengana, in what is one of the most militant and legendary left-led peasant movements, the initial focus of the struggle was against the forced grain levy, that is, against a particularly obnoxious form of government taxation and against the practice of forced labour or *begar* or *vethi*. The other demands of the movement, as it developed, related to restoration of lands that had been cornered by landlords through fraudulent means at earlier settlements and by landlord-moneylenders through foreclosure of debts and distress sales during the Great Depression of the 1930s. In fact, the veteran Communist leader Sundarayya's classic account of the Telengana struggle notes repeatedly that even when peasants occupied land during the course of the struggle, they were most keen to get the same plots that they had earlier owned, that they were reluctant to occupy lands to which

[37] See, Thapar, "Dissent and Protest in the Early Indian Tradition", pp. 191–92 for the traditional mode of dissent and how it was accommodated without it being allowed to present a fundamental challenge to the social order.

they had no customary or hereditary claim and that, when the counter-attacks came, they defended most vigorously their traditional, hereditary plots but not the land they had come to occupy during the course of the struggle.[38] In other words, the peasants' notions of their rights in land were essentially their notions of their rights to own or cultivate those lands to which they had some customary claim, they did not extend to a right to all the landlords' land. Sundarayya recounts in great detail the problems that surfaced when the slogan of "restore the illegally occupied lands to the original peasants" was sought to be implemented. In his words:[39]

> This slogan gave rise to innumerable problems before the *panch* committee and *Sangham* organisers. The landlords had leased the land to some other small peasants or had sold it to them; as such it was not possible, in all cases, to restore these lands back to the original owners, as the new owners were also small peasants, though comparatively well-to-do, who were in our front fighting against the hated landlords and Nizam's rule. Even where the organisers and *panch* committees offered them other equally good, fertile, or even better lands owned by the same landlords, as compensation, the peasants used to say, "give these to the present occupants, but restore to me my paternal or my hereditary lands...." May be due to his property sentiment, "it is mine", while the new land that was being offered was that of the landlord, *or it might be due to his confidence that if he was in possession of his own land, it was a justified right and no one could take it away from him*, while if he took the land of someone else, he felt that the equal guarantee of "rightfullness" or "certainty of permanent ownership" was not there. Further it was noted that the peasant could be moved more easily on this question of re-occupation of his own lost lands than on making him to occupy the surplus lands of the landlords. It was also a feature after the Indian Union Army intervention, when the landlords and deshmukhs were being brought back, that the peasants much more easily gave up the surplus land they had been cultivating but, till the end, fought doggedly to retain those restored lands of their own. In fact when the struggle was withdrawn, *most of the land which was even then in the possession of the peasant masses, were these "restored lands", leased lands and waste lands that had been newly cleared or occupied and cultivated by the rural poor, while a good portion of distributed surplus land was taken back by the landlords* (emphasis added).

The agricultural labourers' demands in Telengana were for the enhancement of wages and not for a share of the land and though some land was distributed to them at the high point of the movement, they mostly failed

[38] Sundarayya, *Telengana People's Struggle*, pp. 115–16, 239–40, 424.
[39] *Ibid*., pp. 115–16.

to retain it when faced with landlord and government repression. It is significant, however, that while they failed to struggle for and retain the landlords' previously cultivated land, they did succeed in retaining "waste lands that had been newly cleared or occupied and cultivated".[40] It is significant because the occupation of waste land which was owned by landlords or the state but never previously cultivated by anybody was very much in consonance with traditional pre-colonial Indian notions of rights in land where rights of different agencies to a share of the produce of the cultivated land were recognized, for example, the share of the state, and if there was a *zamindar*, the share of the *zamindar* and the share of the actual cultivator, but waste-lands were never considered anybody's personal property except notionally that of the state, in the sense that if and when those lands were cultivated, the cultivators should pay a share to the state as land revenue. Therefore, in the case of occupation of waste or *banjar* lands, peasants were again acting in a manner which did not go contrary to traditional notions of rights in waste land.[41]

It appears, then, that despite many variations in tenurial and class structure between the different regions as well as within regions, there was considerable similarity in the demands and issues raised by similar strata of the peasantry all over India.

Further, the variations in the nature of the issues or demands around which struggles emerge would seem to be linked with the variations in the historically evolved notions of legitimacy, of just or legitimate rights, that gripped the consciousness of different strata of the peasantry. In other words, different sections of peasants in different areas had different notions of what their legitimate rights were and these differences were reflected in the variations in the nature of the issues and demands raised by the different sections when they struggled for their rights.[42]

It is also necessary to examine the significance of what they did not demand or make the focus of struggle. For example, no section of the Indian

[40] *Ibid.*, p. 116.

[41] In medieval Europe as well, when peasants demanded land, they did not usually demand the break-up and redistribution of estate lands, but rather sought access to pastures, woodlands and waters. Hilton, "Peasant Society, Peasant Movements and Feudalism in Medieval Europe", in H. Landsberger, ed., *Rural Protest: Peasant Movements and Social Change,* London, 1973, pp. 75–77.

[42] Peasant leaders were quite conscious of this. Harkishen Singh Surjeet, in his interview, pointed out that the tenants' movement in different parts of Punjab had different slogans, different demands, depending on the level of consciousness of the peasants. Chhajju Mal Vaid also emphasized that the level of understanding was different in different areas and this was reflected in the movement. Ruldu Khan pointed to the difference between the tenants of the Sodhis who felt that their landlords' claim to the land was illegitimate and quickly adopted the no-batai slogan whereas the tenants on the neighbouring estate of the Nawab of Mamdot could only be mobilized to struggle against evictions.

peasants demanded in their struggles the complete extinction of the right of the state to a share in the agricultural surplus, nor did any section of the peasantry organize a struggle around the demand for the abolition of *zamindari* or landlordism. In other words, neither abolition of land revenue and other taxes nor abolition of *zamindari* or landlordism was ever part of the immediate demands or actual programme of struggle of any peasant movement in colonial India. These demands were raised at the annual conferences of the Kisan Sabha from the mid-1930s, were enshrined in the manifestoes, were repeated at Kisan conferences and were part of the consciousness of the leadership of the peasant movement, but, at least till 1945–46, and then too only in some areas, they did not reach down and become so integral a part of the peasants' consciousness of their legitimate rights that they were willing to launch struggles on that basis. For example, B.B. Chaudhuri notes, with some surprise, "that it was only in 1936 that the abolition of the (*zamindari*) system was formally stated as one of the basic aims of the kisan movement. This formed a strikingly new feature of the peasant movement. Even earlier, peasant agitation had occasionally led to a complete suspension of rent payment. This, however, did not result from any doubts on the part of the rebel peasants as to the propriety or legality of the institution of zamindari but from a deadlock created by the resolve of the peasant community not to pay rent exceeding a certain rate which the zamindars on their part had found unacceptable. The warring groups soon found a way out, and rent payment became normal. The aim of eliminating the zamindari system was indeed revolutionary". He then proceeds to demonstrate how, as in the case of Bihar, the adoption of this aim was a result of the spread of Marxist ideas and especially of their acceptance by Swami Sahajanand. N.G. Ranga is also very categorical on this point. He clearly states that the Andhra Zamindari Ryot Conference in the late 1920s, in which he participated, "only demanded a radical revision of the Estates Land Act so as to minimize the sufferings of tenants... (but) our peasant workers were not then prepared to demand the abolition of the zamindary system, so unprepared was the political world to grapple with such problems at that time".[43]

To acknowledge this historical fact is not at all to reduce the role of the pressure brought about by the peasant struggles all over the country in reducing the political and social weight of the *zamindari* and *jagirdari* elements and in making the continuance of land revenue on anything like the old basis impossible. All that is being stressed is that while peasants demanded and struggled hard for many things and *it was these struggles that*

[43] B.B. Chaudhuri, "Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar", pp. 348–50; and N.G. Ranga and Swami Sahajanand Saraswati, "Agrarian Revolts", in A.R. Desai, "Peasant Struggles in India", p. 64, reproduced from Ranga and Saraswati, *History of Kisan Movement*, Madras, not dated, but sometime in the 1930s.

made possible and created the climate for the abolition of *zamindari* and other types of land reform, they did not struggle for abolition of *zamindari* or for giving land to the tiller or for the abolition of land revenue in the same manner and to the same extent to which peasants from all over the country struggled for occupancy rights, reduction in rents, abolition of illegal cesses, restoration of upsurged lands, etc. or even in the manner in which they struggled concretely for the overthrow of British imperialism, as, for example, in 1942, when peasants in many parts of India joined a movement that had "Quit India" as its slogan and demand.

How do we explain these elements of Indian peasant consciousness? What were the sources from which these notions of legitimacy were derived? What was the sanction, in the peasants' consciousness, that lay behind these notions of "fairness", "legitimate rights", "unjust claims" and the like?

While I could not even pretend to have anything like an "answer", it does appear that the role of tradition or history or custom was clearly very important in determining the peasants' existing level of consciousness of fair and legitimate rights.[44] This emerges fairly strongly from the above description of the issues that became the focus of peasant struggles. Peasants resisted new impositions by landlords, moneylenders and the state, they questioned changes in their legal and tenurial status, they struggled for what they thought was theirs by virtue of their past history, their customary claims, their caste status: they sought, in the words of E.P. Thompson, to "re-impose the older moral economy".[45]

It is evident that other peasantries, too, reacted in similar ways. Hilton, for example, tells us that in late medieval Europe, many of the movements began as reactions to attempts by the feudal rulers to alter the customary relationships and were a product of the peasants' refusal to "accept the abandonment of traditional roles by any one of the orders of society".[46] Bianco's conclusion on the basis of a survey of peasant struggles in Republican China not led by Communists is also on similar lines. He notes that

> the rural masses did not question the status quo, but only certain new developments which represented a blow to it. They did not rebel against an oppressive established order but rather against a new encroachment on their few rights or against the local deterioration of barely tolerable conditions.... Furthermore, my point is that what mobilised the peasants

[44] For a discussion of the role of custom and tradition in popular protest, see Hilton, *A Medieval Society*, p. 154; Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, p. 114; and Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 67–75.

[45] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, p. 73.

[46] Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*, pp. 96–109, and 118–19.

psychologically and led them to rebel was not so much the deep and structural causes of their misery and oppression as the factors which they perceived as exceptional or accidental (and therefore less easily accepted)...."[47]

However, before moving on to a consideration of other sources of notions of legitimacy it is necessary to make two qualifications on the issue of the role of custom or tradition. First, I wish to emphasize that I do not use the terms "tradition" or "custom" in the sense of an unchanging or fixed tradition or custom, but as a historically evolved and evolving tradition or custom, one that was capable of transformation and was being transformed, but which nevertheless had deep historical roots in the civilization and culture of which it was a living part. Second, I agree entirely with Wolf when he says that "the persistence of tradition needs explanation as much as change. It may be that people cleave to ancestral ways through general inertia, but it is more likely that there are good and sufficient reasons behind such persistence, much as there are good and sufficient reasons for change".[48] It is evident enough that the Indian peasants we have encountered in these pages were resisting changes brought about by the onset of capitalist colonialism that were altering their life not for the better but for the worse. Colonial taxation systems were more insensitive to the rhythms of peasant life than pre-colonial ones, tenancy had appeared in a kind of exploitative guise hitherto unknown, moneylenders had assumed roles they never dreamed of in pre-modern society, traditional notions of reciprocity had broken down without the compensatory mechanisms of social security safety nets, etc. It is little wonder that peasants resisted this change and wanted a restoration of their older, more traditional rights. It needs to be emphasized, however, that when change was offered for the better, when democracy was offered in place of authoritarian rule or abolutism, for example, the peasants did accept, not overnight, but over time, the new system and even learnt to value it and bend it to their needs. They have learnt to accept and even welcome other new innovations, like cooperative credit societies, tractors, new seeds, modern means of irrigation, when these have suited them. Love for tradition or custom has not stood for long in the way of adapting to change that was for the better.

It also seems that the emphasis placed by James Scott on the right to subsistence and its linkage with the notion of reciprocity in his study of the peasant revolts in Southeast Asia in relevant for our purposes.[49] Indian peasants, too, protested in various ways when their subsistence was threatened.

[47] Bianco, *Peasants and Revolution*, pp. 322–23.
[48] Wolf, *Peasant Wars*, p. xvii.
[49] Scott, *The Moral Economy of the Peasant*.

When crops failed or famine stalked the land, or when prices crashed, or when they rose so much that the rural poor could not buy enough food, protests emerged. The very poor sometimes looted bazaars or granaries, tenants withheld rent, others asked for reduction or remission in government taxation. The right to subsistence, therefore, does seem to have been a part of the Indian peasants' consciousness.

Apart from the most obvious source of the notion of right to subsistence in the instinct for survival and the notion of right to life which is an invariant of human consciousness, one might also explore its roots or at least legitimization in older or traditional social and economic institutions. Thompson, for example, tells us that food riots in eighteenth-and early nineteenth-century England were "legitimized by the assumptions of an older moral economy, which taught the immorality of any unfair method of forcing up the price of provisions by profiteering upon the necessities of the people".[50] In India, "good" kings and zamindars were expected to function within the norms of reciprocity and throw open their stores and granaries during periods of shortage or famines.[51] Besides, even in the inequitable arrangements that defined a traditional Indian village in which the lower castes were often given no right to own land, they were guaranteed a minimum subsistence by being assured a certain share of the produce in return for services rendered. Thus, the right to subsistence of even the otherwise "socially excluded" groups was recognized in the traditional social and economic structure.[52]

Apart from tradition or custom and right to subsistence, legality was another source from which peasant notions of legitimacy appear to have been derived. Undoubtedly, on the one hand, there are indications that new laws, when they infringed custom or traditional practice, were resisted

[50] Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 67–68. See also Hilton, *Unjust Taxation and Popular Resistance*, for urban medieval revolts against high taxes on food and drink. For China, Bianco points out that "the only other kind of rural troubles which might have been as common as the disturbances brought about by taxation were the plundering of stores of rice... or other food products in time of hunger. These, however, were very limited affairs, usually involving no more than a few hundred people at best...." "Peasants and Revolution", p. 315.

[51] See, for example, quotation from Hardiman in footnote 12 in this chapter.

[52] For that reason, I believe that while a consciousness of right to land, except for house-sites, is generally absent among the lowest castes, the notion of a right to work, to guaranteed employment is quite strong, because traditional arrangements ensured this. I think this in part explains the tremendous popularity, as well as the tremendous potential of the Employment Guarantee Scheme for the rural poor launched since the 1970s in India, first in Maharashtra, then in some other parts of the country, and finally at the national level as part of the declared policy of the Congress-led coalition government in 2004. For the same reason, I also believe that the obsession with "land struggles" and land reform in the form of land to the tiller on the part of the Indian Left has distracted energies away from other demands and issues that were more capable of bringing about a transformation, at least in the short-run, in the life of the rural poor.

with considerable persistence and militancy.[53] But, on the other hand, there is also evidence to suggest that legal sanctions played an important role in determining legitimacy, though they were not sufficient in themselves. For example, one of the major demands of peasants was the abolition of *illegal* cesses and *abwabs* imposed by landlords in addition to the legal rent. While the origin of the belief in their illegitimacy may well derive from their being violations of customary practice, the fact of their being illegal as well may also have contributed to and strengthened the notion of their illegitimate character. I illustrate with a few longish examples, because I think the significance of the aspect of legality has been generally underestimated.

In Punjab, for example, the struggle of the sharecroppers of the Nili Bar and Montgomery canal colonies against payment of illegal cesses that emerged in 1938 received a big fillip and spread rapidly after the issuing of a legal notification by the Punjab Government in the same year which declared these cesses to be illegal and recognized that only half the produce was to be paid as the legal rent. Future agitation on this question took its stand on this legal right and though the notification had only been intended for application to the rent exacted by the lease-holding companies who leased land directly from the government, it was sought to be extended in practice to the big landlords in 1946–47 in the post-war phase when the movement again surged forward. (see Chapter 5, Section I and Chapter 6, Section III.) Similar, though short-lived, was the effect of the "rumour" that spread in the colony areas that security of tenure was about to be granted to tenants-at-will—a rumour that was most likely caused by the abortive bill introduced by the Congress leader Mian Iftikhar-ud-din in the Punjab Assembly which did indeed seek to grant security of tenure to tenants-at-will. Merely the prospect of the grant of a legal right triggered off attempts by landlords to evict tenants and by tenants to resist evictions. The furore died down once it became clear that the prospect was not about to become a reality. (see Chapter 5, Section I, especially footnote 27.)

Another striking illustration is provided by the Tebhaga Movement that erupted in Bengal in 1946–47. As we know, the main demand around which this movement was organized was that the sharecroppers or *bargadars* would pay only *tebhaga* or one-third share of their produce to the landlords instead of the one-half share they paid earlier. An effort to trace the origin of this demand yields very interesting evidence on the importance of legality.

[53] In Patiala, for example, though the *biswedars* had been given the legal right to the land and its rent, the tenants refused to recognize the legitimacy of their legal right and asserted their own traditional, hereditary right as the legitimate right. Similarly, in Una Tehsil in Hoshiarpur District in British Punjab, the tenants did not accept the legitimacy of the legal change that deprived them of their hereditary proprietary rights. Similarly, in Telengana, the peasants struggled for restoration of the land that had been legally, though illegitimately in their eyes, taken away by the landlords.

While *bargadars* had even earlier shown evidence of their readiness to organize and resist, the issues around which the earlier resistance had emerged were very different. In 1923, when the government brought in a bill to amend the Bengal Tenancy Act and one of the changes contemplated was the conferring of occupancy rights on *bargadars*, there was a kindling of hope and this led to the formation of *bargadars'* associations in some places, but the government soon abandoned this move and the movement too died out.[54] In the late 1930s, when the Kisan Sabha became active among the bargadars, a movement emerged around the demand for reduction of interest rates on grain loans and the abolition of *hat tola* or levy imposed by landowners on poor peasants when they came to the weekly markets.[55] There was, till then, no sign of any demand for the reduction of the share of the produce to be paid to the landlord. In 1938, the Bengal Land Revenue Enquiry Commission (popularly known as the Floud Commission) was appointed by the government and in 1939 the Bengal Provincial Kisan Sabha submitted a memorandum to this Commission which contained no mention of the demand for *tebhaga*.[56] In March 1940, the Floud Commission submitted its report and one of the major recommendations it made was that the landlords' share of the produce be reduced to one-third. It was only after this that the Kisan Sabha took up this demand. In the words of Abani Lahiri, one of the major leaders of the Tebhaga struggle:[57]

> The call for Tebhaga ... was first given in the resolution adopted in the Fourth Provincial Kisan Conference held at Panjia, Jessore, in June 1940. *This slogan was derived from the report of the Floud Commission* submitted to the Government in March 1940 in which it recommended inter alia that the sharecroppers should be made to pay not more than one-third of the produce to the owner of the land (emphasis added).

War and famine combined to create conditions that were unfavourable for the launching of any movement around this demand and it was only at the Bengal Kisan Council meeting in September 1946 that the decision was taken to start the *tebhaga* struggle from the next harvest. From October–November of 1946 to January of 1947 was the first phase of the movement, in which it was mainly limited to organized peasant bases.[58] At this stage, another important development took place and the movement entered a

[54] See B.B. Chaudhuri, "Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar", pp. 342–43.
[55] See Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*, p. 23.
[56] *Ibid*., pp. 25–27.
[57] Abani Lahiri, "Last Battle of Bengal Peasants under British Rule", in Nitish Ranjan Ray et al., eds, *Challenge: A Saga of India's Struggle for Freedom*, New Delhi, 1984, p. 372.
[58] *Ibid*., pp. 377–83 and Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*, p. 36.

new phase. The Bengal Bargadar Temporary Regulation Bill was published in the *Calcutta Gazette* on 22 January 1947 and this Bill incorporated the main substance of the demand for *tebhaga*. Its impact was immediate. In the words of Sunil Sen, another very important leader of the Tebhaga struggle, the bill "gave an impetus to the tebhaga struggle. The jotedars could no longer say that the demand was illegal. The news spread that two-thirds share for the bargadar had been conceded by the government". In fact, Sunil Sen compares the impact of this bill to the effects of the famous *parwana* of Ashley Eden, published by Hem Chandra Kar, a deputy magistrate, in August 1859, which had triggered off the famous Blue (Indigo) Mutiny. "Similarly", he says, "the knowledge of the Bargadars Bill, which gave legal sanction to tebhaga demand, gave new heart to the vast number of *bargadars* who had so long remained neutral, passive and hesitant. In fact there was an extension of the movement to new villages where the Kisan Sabha did not exist.... One of the immediate effects of the Bargadars Bill in Dinajpur was the swing of Muslim peasants to the movement".[59] This extension of the movement and its militant character, however, soon frightened the Muslim League ministry that was then in power in Bengal and, at the end of February 1947, it launched a major offensive of repression and also withdrew the Bill.[60] This, along with other factors such as the communal flare-up, led to the collapse of the movement and *bargadars* had to wait till 1950 when the Congress ministry in Independent India finally passed the West Bengal Bargadars Act.[61]

Thus, it seems fairly clear that not only was the very demand for *tebhaga* "derived from the report of the Floud Commission", as Abani Lahiri tells us, but the acceptance of this recommendation by the government and the introduction of a bill based on it played a major role in legitimizing this demand in the eyes of the *bargadars* and increasing their readiness to struggle for it. The legality conferred on this demand certainly enhanced its "justness" and "fairness" in the consciousness of the peasants themselves.

The experience of the *muzara* movement in Patiala, in which tenants struggled for full proprietory rights over land they claimed was theirs by right, also highlights the importance of legality, though in a slightly different way. The Patiala *muzaras*, much before they were able to organize themselves into a movement in the 1930s under Communist leadership, had resisted the biswedars' encroachment on their rights by filing cases against them in the law courts. They continued to pursue this form of resistance with great avidity even while they were engaged in a militant struggle based on non-payment of rent and occupation of land. Even the Communists made

[59] Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*, pp. 47–49.

[60] *Ibid*., p. 68 and Lahiri, "Last Battle of Bengal Peasants", p. 384.

[61] Sunil Sen, *Agrarian Struggle in Bengal*, p. 47.

considerable efforts to secure favourable judgements for the tenants, at times by recourse to "underhand" means for they realized that the moral effect of winning individual cases in courts would be extremely positive in terms of strengthening the peasants' conviction in the justness of their cause and belief in the possibility of its success. Hari Singh, a local level activist of the Patiala *muzaras'* struggle, narrated the story of how they won a case against the *biswedars* by manipulating the *patwari's* records and bribing the magistrate. "The victory in this case gave great strength to our village as well as other villages", he said.[62]

Ruldu Khan also had a very important story to narrate, which relates to the post-Independence period.[63] The government, he said, gave orders, sometime in 1954–55, that only one-third share was to be paid by tenants as rent to landlords. When this happened, he said, "we started a movement in the Jalalabad area (of Ferozepore District) that we will pay only one-third". A volunteer corps of 200–300 *lathi*-wielding youths was formed and, on invitation from the tenants, they would go to the fields, divide the crop, and leave one-third in the field for the landlords to take away. This movement was directed against big landowners who had come from Pakistan as refugees and been allotted evacuee property in this area. The movement had continued for a couple of months, when the neighbouring Sodhi landlords (against whom a movement had been started in 1946), suffered a humiliating defeat in a legal case of assault they had lodged against some of the activists and tenants. The Sodhis had named some 80 or 90 people as the accused. The Communist leaders produced 200 people in the court and asked the Sodhis to identify the ones they had accused. Naturally, they could not and this prompted a derisive comment from the magistrate, who said, "Sodhi Sahib, those days are gone, when you could take opium and just lie around" and summarily dismissed the case. "After that", said Ruldu Khan, "in Fazilka tahsil [of Ferozepore District], the system of one-third *batai* became current". Thus, the conferment or the prospect of conferment of a legal right as in the case of *tebhaga* in Bengal and *adho adh* in the canal colonies of Punjab created the initial space for struggle and a legal victory as in the case of the Patiala and Ferozepore *muzaras*, helped to further it and ensured its success.

Many other examples could also be easily mentioned. I have already cited Sunil Sen earlier for the effect of the *parwana* of Anthony Eden that triggered off the Blue Mutiny in 1859 in Bengal. For Bengal, again, B.B. Chaudhuri emphasizes the vital connection between the Bengal Tenancy Bill and peasant resistance in Bengal. "The resistance was most widespread", he says, "during the period of controversy over the Bengal Tenancy Bill

[62] Interview.
[63] Interview.

(1879–85), which was finally enacted in 1885. The Bill aroused in the peasants extravagant expectations, and they construed it as a moral approval of their stand by the government. All sorts of rumours were circulating: the despotic powers of zamindars would soon be gone for ever, and with it the scare of an enhancement of rent, the rent rate would be reduced everywhere and legislation would deprive zamindars of all powers to enhance it".[64] Similarly, Rodney Hilton has pointed to the influence of legal thought on the rebels of 1381 in England and E.P. Thompson to the importance of the Constitution of 1688 in popular consciousness in eighteenth-century England.[65]

It seems, then, that in the peasants' consciousness the notion of making a "legitimate" demand was strengthened by the fact that it was also a "legal" demand, and this added to the sense of "right" and therefore to the readiness to struggle for it. Thus, laws may be resisted when they violated established norms and traditions in a manner unfavourable to peasant interests; but when laws or legal practice conformed to or sanctioned tradition and past history, the combination certainly facilitated peasant resistance. It also seems that new legal measures, or even proposals for new legal measures, created new notions of "legitimate" rights, when these measures or proposals were favourable to peasant interest. To quote Jagjit Singh Lyallpuri, a major leader of the Kisan Sabha in Punjab: "Legal rights are very important for the peasantry. The notion of 'what is our right' is tied up with legal notions".[66] Bhowani Sen, a major leader of the Bengal Kisan Sabha, confirms the significance of legality in the following fashion: "Peasants are not happy about doing anything illegal. When they were told that a new authority existed, namely that of the Kisan Sabha, they came to the Kisan Sabha and applied for a red flag to be given to them so that they could proclaim the authority of the Kisan Sabha in their village and enforce the demands of the Tebhaga Movement. They even 'arrested' police parties in the name of the Kisan Sabha. They understood that there was now a new Raj and no longer the old one".[67]

One might very tentatively suggest that the importance of legal sanctions in the peasants' consciousness may also be the product of tradition and history. While it should be a matter of little dispute that the colonial ideology of the rule of law had permeated to the peasantry through the entire network of administrative and legal institutions and this ideology

[64] B.B. Chaudhuri, "Agrarian Movements in Bengal and Bihar", p. 337.

[65] Hilton, "Peasant Society", pp. 22–23 and Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class*, pp. 85 ff.

[66] Interview.

[67] Cited in Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution", p. 701. Mohan Lal, a Communist trade union leader of Punjab, said that even in the case of workers it was easier to make them struggle for implementation of legal rights that already existed, than for new rights (interview).

formed a part of its consciousness, it is also likely that older traditions, too, contributed to the notion of the importance of legal sanctions. After all, the Mughal state, for all its supposed arbitrariness, was based on a particular conception of the rule of law and ancient Indians were fully familiar with the Hindu notion of "dharma". The importance of legal sanction may thus well have been derived not only from recent colonial ideology and practice but also, and perhaps much more so, from "tradition".[68] However, regardless of the source, if legality occupies a significant place in peasant consciousness, then the place usually assigned (by radicals) to changes in the formal legal framework and to struggles for securing those changes is also likely to have to be shifted from the slot usually reserved for them at the far, reformist, end of the political spectrum.

I might conclude this part of the discussion by suggesting that these were some of the elements that constituted what has been called the 'moral economy' of the peasant. I do not for a moment suggest that these elements—customary practice, the right to subsistence, the notion of reciprocity and the notion of legality—in any way exhaust the range of sources from which peasant notions of legitimacy may have been derived. It does appear, however, that these were some of the more important constituents of the peasants' consciousness of their place in the world.

However, even the limited range of sources of legitimacy that we have explored indicates the unviability of a model of peasant consciousness based on an ahistorical notion of an "autonomous subaltern domain" of which "one of... [the] invariant features was a notion of resistance to élite domination".[69] For example, it is hardly possible that customary practice, which was a major source of legitimacy, emerged out of the working of some pure "subaltern domain"—it is inconceivable that the ruling classes through the long centuries of their domination had not succeeded in defining and redefining "custom" in accordance with their own needs, just as it is obvious that the peasants would have been struggling, whenever they found it possible, to define it in a manner more suited to their interests. That the peasants were still "subalterns" is proof enough of the fact that they had not succeeded in arriving at a definition of "custom" that expressed their needs and interests. Therefore, the definition of "custom" which informed their consciousness and which they even used on occasion to rebel against their oppressors, was still a definition that did not transcend the limits placed on it by the "élites", by those who had played the "dominant" role in its evolution. Thus, at its very heart, that is, in the definition of "custom" itself, peasant consciousness was deeply penetrated by ideas and ideologies

[68] These are clearly areas which require a great deal of further investigation and the formulations made here are very tentative.

[69] Guha, "On Some Aspects of the Historiography of Colonial India", p. 5.

evolved by the dominant classes for the maintenance and furtherance of their control and hegemony.[70] This strong presence of "élite" ideas and ideologies in peasant or "subaltern" consciousness points to the necessity of transformation of this consciousness, before it could be designated as a revolutionary consciousness, or even as one of which "the notion of resistance to élite domination" was an invariable constituent.

[70] In a similar vein, Hilton argues in the context of medieval Europe that "it is impossible to think of the peasantry as being autonomous from the rest of society and in particular from the structure of the feudal rulers.... There were many threads leading outward from the village to the locality, to the region, to the state, not only economic but ideological and cultural as well." In particular he refers to the parish priests who "were very important conveyors of the ideology of the rulers of society to the peasants. This was demonstrated very clearly in the limited ideology of the peasantry in times of revolt, when they found it impossible to break away from the traditional image of society which was promulgated by official ruling society mainly through the church". Hilton, "Peasant Society", pp. 211–12.

TWELVE

In Conclusion: Transforming Peasant Consciousness—Practice versus Theory

In this chapter, the focus is on the issue of transformation of peasant consciousness: its desirability, its necessity, its possibility, its modality. In this context, I first discuss some of the elements of Indian peasant consciousness that in my view were in obvious need of transformation and ask the question why the process of their transformation remained weak and incomplete. I also attempt an analysis of what to me appear to be some of the limitations of the existing conceptual models within which the question of peasant consciousness is discussed and why they are inadequate for addressing the vital issue of transformation.

Analyzing Areas of Weakness

A very significant feature that emerges from the survey of the issues around which peasant struggles were fought in the period under study is that at least many sections of the peasantry in many regions of the country did not have a strong and clear-cut anti-feudal or anti-landlord consciousness based on the modern ideologies of equality or equity or land-to-the-tiller. The nature of the issues around which struggles were fought appears to suggest that peasant leaders were not as successful in establishing new, modern notions of legitimacy in peasant consciousness as they were in leading struggles based on existing or older, pre-modern notions of legitimacy. I do not say this only on the basis that specific struggles with abolition of landlordism or even abolition of the *zamindari*, *taluqdari*, or *jagirdari* system as the main demand did not emerge. I readily recognize that certain kinds of issues cannot be translated into a list of demands around which direct struggles are waged, and they may well remain the focus of agitation or

even mobilization and propaganda rather than of struggle, without in any way becoming less important in the peasants' own consciousness.[1] It is, therefore, entirely possible that some sections of peasants may well have acquired modern notions of the illegitimacy of rentier landlordism even though this did not get reflected in any particular struggle. But the very differential pattern of implementation of land reform legislation and the wide-spread evictions of tenants-at-will in the 1950s, facts widely recognized,[2] do suggest that there were at least large sections among the tenants-at-will or sharecroppers, and perhaps even among occupancy tenants, who had not acquired a sufficiently strong sense of legitimacy of their right to land and of the illegitimacy of the landlords' rights that they could check or even strongly resist this process.

This formulation in no way minimizes the contribution of the peasant struggles, including those of tenants-at-will, to the process of agrarian restructuring. These struggles helped create the possibilities, the political space and built up the pressure necessary for agrarian transformation. And it was these struggles, when combined with the modern anti-feudal or anti-rentier landlordism ideology of the leadership of the anti-imperialist and peasant movements (which included Communists, Congress Socialists and many other left and non-left Congressmen) and the commitment of the post-colonial state to land reforms and agricultural development, and the imperatives of post-Independence electoral politics based on adult franchise, that made possible the abolition of the *zamindari*, *jagirdari* and *taluqdari* systems, the enacting of protective tenancy legislation and the imposition of ceilings on land ownership.[3] The process by which this occurred was similar to that by which land revenue or taxation of agricultural income was *de facto* abolished in the post-Independence years despite peasants having never struggled for its abolition but only for its reduction—it was reduced to the point of becoming almost invisible.

[1] It is on the basis of this understanding that I have argued above in Chapter 5 that the peasantry of a district like Jullundur in British Punjab, which had no big peasant "struggle" to its credit, was no less advanced in its political consciousness or its level of organization than that of other districts such as Lahore or Amritsar which got the chance to show off their strength via struggles or *morchas*.

[2] See, for example, Daniel Thorner, *Agrarian Prospect in India,* Delhi, 1956; Andre Beteille, *Caste, Class and Power: Changing Patterns of Stratification in a Tanjore Village,* Bombay, 1969; A.M. Khusro, "Land Reforms Since Independence", in V.B. Singh, ed., *Economic History of India, 1857–1956,* Bombay, 1965; Wolf Ladejinsky, "Land Ceiling and Land Reforms", *Economic and Political Weekly,* Annual Number, 8, 1972. I am only citing here some of the better-known studies—the literature on land reforms and their implementation is much too vast to be cited in full.

[3] For a wide-ranging survey of land reforms, see P.C. Joshi, *Land Reforms in India: Trends and Perspectives,* Bombay, 1975, and Aditya Mukherjee, "Land Reforms".

However, to come back to the main point of the argument, if it is a fact that at least many sections of Indian peasants did not acquire a modern anti-feudal consciousness, then it is a fact that needs explanation. The question that arises is: Why did the same degree of success not attend the effort at taking anti-feudal ideas to the peasantry as had been achieved in transmitting to the peasants anti-imperialist ideology and the ideology of political democracy. After all, the hold of colonial ideologies of Pax Brittanica, of the British as the *mai baap* of the people, of Indians being incapable of self-government, was successfully broken by sustained effort, over nearly half a century, at the permeation of the anti-imperialist ideologies of the drain of wealth from India, of British rule being responsible for the poverty of the Indian people and for the underdevelopment of the Indian economy, of *swaraj* being a birthright and the like; and peasants were successfully mobilized into movements that demanded national independence and the establishment of a sovereign democratic republic. This task was performed by the efforts of all nationalists, whether left or non-left. But a similar success did not attend the efforts of those who were also clearly committed to taking anti-feudal ideologies to the peasantry and these were mainly those belonging to the left-wing of the anti-imperialist movement. Why were these elements, in spite of their obvious commitment, effort and desire, unable, to the same extent, to give the peasants' consciousness an anti-feudal structure.

The failure, it may be suggested, stemmed at least partly from the lack of understanding of the relationship between the peasants' notions of legitimacy and their willingness to struggle. The leadership of the peasant movements perhaps misread the peasants' willingness to engage in militant struggle based largely on their own historically evolved, traditional notions of legitimacy as proof of their having acquired an anti-feudal or revolutionary consciousness. Possibly they persuaded themselves that the anti-zamindari and anti-landlord ideology that informed the annual manifestoes of the Kisan Sabhas and resolutions passed in Kisan conferences had actually become a part of the peasants' consciousness, as it was a part of their own consciousness. It is also likely that the simplistic Marxist notion that economic struggles would automatically lead to changes in ideological–political consciousness prevented the leadership from being more sensitive to the reality of the relative autonomy of the ideological–political domain. They assumed that as long as they were able to place "objectively" radical slogans and demands before the peasantry, and provide the necessary organization, they could succeed in the task of revolutionary mobilization.

They were unable to comprehend that the degree of the feeling of legitimacy of one's demands would also affect the degree of militancy and willingness to sacrifice and fight for the cause. A demand that has behind it a

strong sanction, whether derived from historical tradition or custom or law, is likely to be pushed with a greater fervour than another which does not appear, to those who have to fight for it, as "legitimate" or "right", though it may be far more radical and objectively much more in their interest than the other one. For the latter, more radical, demand to become part of the immediate programme of a movement, or to become the basis of mobilization and struggle, a process of ideological–political transformation, which would establish the "legitimacy" of the demand by means of demonstrating not only its attractiveness but also its "correctness", would be a pre-condition. A new sanction for the demand would have to be established, through political and ideological education, propaganda, agitation, that is, the peasants' consciousness of what is legitimate would have to change in order to create the conditions for a movement based on the new demand. In other words, the most revolutionary programme would fail to mobilize the peasantry unless its legitimacy or correctness was first established in the minds of the peasants and this was primarily an ideological–political task. The distinction we are seeking to make is between organizing movements based on existing notions of legitimacy, that is, those in which the primary focus is on providing the necessary organizational effort, in terms of leadership, cadre, etc. and generating movements in which the focus is as much on engendering and fostering new notions of legitimacy as on providing the organizational and political framework.

This is not to deny the necessity and importance of the first, that is, of organizing movements based on existing consciousness (in fact, these may even be sometimes necessary as mediatory steps to the next stage of struggle), but only to emphasize that if the movements are to be carried forward, even at the economic level, or if their revolutionary and transformative potential is to be realized, they must simultaneously undertake the task of transforming the political–ideological consciousness of the peasantry, otherwise even very militant movements, once their demands are realized, will merely die natural deaths, that is, they will not have contributed to and become part of the wider process of ideological and political transformation of the consciousness of the peasantry, which alone can lead to and sustain a basic transformation of the structure in the interests of peasants. In other words, for peasants to become revolutionary, as distinct from militant or rebellious, their notions of legitimacy must be transformed; their demands must be based on a sanction or notion of legitimacy which derives from an understanding of the inequitable and oppressive nature of the existing system and from a desire to transform it in a more favourable direction, that is, they must perceive the link between their economic problems or deprivation and the system which engenders it and see even their limited struggles as part of the process of transforming the system. In this sense, a struggle based on very modest economic demands may in fact be

more "revolutionary" than one based on much more advanced economic demands, depending on the extent to which it is linked, in the consciousness of those who participate in it, with the larger question of transformation of the system. And this mediation or link, I believe, does not spring from or is not established automatically by virtue of the economic struggle itself, but through ideological–political struggle or education. In this context, the "subaltern" perspective, which postulates an advanced consciousness as inherent, impedes such efforts towards ideological transformation in real life and also prevents historical understanding and is thus objectively reactionary.

That the lack of understanding of and emphasis on ideological–political transformation was a major weakness of left, especially Communist, politics, and that this weakness was to boomerang tragically on the very basis of Communist influence and even existence, can be seen from the experience of the *Muzara* Movement in Patiala studied at length in Chapter 7, which the Punjab Communists regard as their most radical struggle. This weakness was visible at all levels—at the level of the leadership, of the cadre or political workers and of the peasants.

At the first level, that is, of the leaders, this weakness is apparent from the fact that their own conception of socialism or the quality of their Marxism appears to have been quite limited. Almost the entire Communist leadership of Patiala was a product of the anti-imperialist Akali Movement of the 1920s, and what had attracted them most towards the Communist movement was its militant and uncompromising character in a period in which the Akalis were becoming increasingly collaborationist and loyalist.[4] However, what was surprising, and perhaps unfortunate, was that even after these leaders had been attracted to the Communist cause, not enough effort seems to have been made, by the higher levels of party leadership, to give to them a more complex and thorough understanding of Marxism and Marxist politics and of the socialist vision or ideal or goal. Perhaps this was a reflection of the lack of understanding of and emphasis on the ideological–political dimension of politics at the very top levels of Communist leadership in India. It appears that it was considered quite enough if a certain group or set of people were willing to call themselves Communists and fight under the Communist banner and give adherence to the Party programme and accept party discipline, that is, organizationally become part of the Communist movement; little heed seems to have been paid to the equally important job of actually educating them in Marxism or

[4] Jagir Singh Joga confirms that it was their "disillusionment with the Congress and the Akalis on account of their vacillation vis-à-vis the Maharajas" that attracted him and his comrades including Bhagwan Singh Longowalia, Harman Singh Dharamgarh towards the Communists (interview).

socialist ideas. The efforts that were made[5] were clearly not enough.[6] This is apparent from the fact that the chairman of the Reception Committee of a Communist Kisan conference could, in 1943, after extending the "Red Salute", ask his audience—"Is there any reason Patiala must remain in the twelfth century? Why can it not become like Russia or *California*?"[7]

The statement brings us, rather poignantly, to the heart of the matter. Socialism meant, in simple terms, development. (The comrade quoted here had in the same breath asked for the setting up of factories.) Russia was highly developed and so too was California—so where was the anomaly?

In Patiala we have another particularly telling example of this perspective: the Kisan Muzara Committee, at the height of the *Muzara* Movement in October 1939, when the Communists were in control of it, threatened the *kamins* (landless labourers and village servants) with loss of wages or expulsion from the village if they did not boycott the *biswedars*[8]—strange behaviour indeed for people who swore by the proletariat, urban as well as rural. This could be an exaggerated example, a slip perhaps, but the general negligence of the rural poor is enough proof in itself that the bias in perspective existed. This weakness sometimes created highly embarrassing situations for the Communist movement itself, as, for example, when Dharam Singh Fakkar, one of the earliest and most militant leaders of the *Muzara* Movement, who was himself a tenant, refused, in defiance of party directives, to part with and distribute the surplus from 300 bighas (roughly 100 acres) of land that he got as a result of the new tenancy legislation.[9]

Second, the local-level leaders felt little need to convey even their own limited conception of socialism to their followers. Just as the leadership at the national and provincial levels was content with establishing their organizational hegemony over the local leadership, similarly these local leaders appeared quite unaware of the necessity of the ideological

[5] Jagir Singh Joga refers to study circles that were conducted by leaders like Ajoy Ghosh, Bhagat Singh Bilga, Achhar Singh Chhina, Teja Singh Swatantar after 1938. He also refers to the non-availability of any Marxist literature in Urdu, Hindi or Punjabi. *Ibid*.

[6] Brish Bhan's comments on the theoretical capacities of the Patiala Communists corroborate our understanding. To quote: "My Communist friends in the PEPSU area were not sufficiently educated in theory. None of them, except perhaps Bhagwan Singh Longwalia, had a theoretical calibre. Even Teja Singh Swatantar was not a thinker, he was an organizer, militant leader. Communists in Central Punjab were slightly better educated. I would discuss my views with Master Hari Singh, for example, but rarely with the PEPSU Communists" (interview).

[7] Poster announcing a Kisan Conference at village Chau near Mansa in October 1943. It contains the address of the chairman of the Reception Committee of the Conference that was to be held earlier at Rar on 14–15 August, but could not be held because of police harassment. Poster attached in Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 2193*.

[8] CID Secret Abstract of Intelligence dated 6 October 1939 and Confidential Weekly Report from IGP, Patiala, dated 10 October 1930, Patiala State Records, *PM's Office File 1553*.

[9] Interview with Giani Bachhan Singh.

transformation of their cadre at the still lower levels. In the words of Jagir Singh Joga: "When the *Muzara* Movement was strong, there was no need for this education. We told them about their economic distress and that was enough".[10] Many political workers were drawn to the Communist movement because they could see that the Communists were the most militant and uncompromising upholders of the *muzara* cause. That ideological persuasion, or identification with the Communist or socialist cause (as distinct from the *muzara* cause), was neither the initial reason for their moving into the Communist ranks nor did it become the reason for their staying on is shown by the fact that, whenever the *Muzara* Movement was at a low ebb (as in 1940–42), or when the rift with the Akalis became open and clear (as in 1944–45), many political workers who had worked under Communist direction and leadership tended to drift towards the Akalis—they had, in spite of their association with the Communist movement, remained Akalis at heart and had never really become "Communists" in any sense of the term, except organizationally.[11] That this was true not only of the weak-kneed among the cadre is shown by the fact that those who constituted the "armed wing" of the Lal Communist Party in the late 1940s and early 1950s and of whom one would expect a certain level of commitment to and awareness of the Communist or socialist ideal, were actually chosen for their facility at wielding the weapons of war (most of them were ex-soldiers) rather than for their greater commitment or militancy and certainly not because they were ideologically the most advanced. In fact, on the testimony of the man who recruited this "armed wing", since there was little time to actually impart training in armed combat, the whole emphasis was on recruiting people who already knew how to wield a gun.[12]

[10] He added: "We have started that education now" (interview). Presumably now that the peasantry, in Joga's view, is prosperous, they need the political education. At another point, he said: "The problem was that the *muzara* villages were very backward, there were hardly any people who were educated. Marxist political education is difficult to understand without some basic level of education. We used to try our best to educate, but with little success" (interview).

[11] To the question: "did not the lack of political education mean that if the Akalis, Master Tara Singh, etc., said that they would fight for the *muzara* cause, they would succeed in drawing the political workers and the masses towards them?", Jagir Singh Joga responded: "Yes, it did. But they did not and could not fight for them". To a further question: "But didn't the Akalis make efforts in this direction?" he was more forthcoming and said: "They did succeed in getting some people from us. Jagir Singh Phaguwalia, who was with us till 1940–41, Pritam Singh Gujjran, etc. They would also succeed in taking people with them from the *Malik* (that is, peasant proprietors) villages but not from the *muzaras*. Their real success came after the riots of 1947, when the Maharaja colluded with them" (interview).

[12] "We recruited the sons of the muzaras who were ex-military men. For example, Kehar Singh of my village had been in the army for six or seven years. We had no time to train people in armed warfare, therefore we thought we should get already trained people".

As for the mass of the peasants or the *muzaras*, they had never dreamed beyond becoming proprietors of the land their forefathers had lost. Their struggle and their conceptions of that struggle were limited to a desire for land. At no stage of the movement were significant efforts made by the Communists to transform this initial and no doubt valid land-hunger into a wider conception of social transformation by means of projecting before them a vision wider than that of owning their own plot of land.[13]

Hence, once the *muzaras* got their land, the Communist influence over them declined almost as rapidly as it had grown. One could even say then that the Communists in Patiala did a good job in the *Muzara* Movement, but as social workers or trade unionists and not as "Communists".

This lack of understanding of the importance of ideology or of the ideological–political dimension could be seen in other aspects of Communist functioning as well, apart from the aspect of political and ideological education and transformation of leaders, cadres and masses. For example, when the Communists, from the late 1940s, sought to give the *Muzara* Movement a broader base and include within it, apart from the occupancy tenants, other sections of rural society such as tenants-at-will, agricultural labourers and the like, the *only* way in which they sought to do this was by promising them all a share of the land that would be taken from the *biswedars*.[14] While not denying the legitimacy of an effort which seeks to

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(interview with Giani Bachhan Singh). That the members of this "armed force" could not be totally relied upon to use their weapons only at the right time is evident from the fact that the arms were always kept with Giani Bachhan Singh or some other trusted member of the Party and given to the "armed force" only in time of actual need (interviews with Giani Bachhan Singh and G.S. Randhawa). Giani Bachhan Singh himself later joined the Congress.

[13] Brish Bhan was categorical in his response to the question: "did the Communists succeed in taking politics to the peasantry?" He said: "No. That is my view. And even now they are not doing it". To a further question: "did he think that the backwardness and lack of education of the peasantry was the chief constraint on this process?" he replied: "I don't agree. Even an average man will respond to ideas of social justice, oppression, etc.... Because they (the Communists) were themselves not clear on this question, they could not take these ideas to the peasantry" (interview).

[14] Interviews with G.S. Randhawa, Jagir Singh Joga and Giani Bachhan Singh. G.S. Randhawa, describing the attempt at winning over tenants-at-will and agricultural labourers to the movement, said: "When I used to go to the villages, I would most often sleep in the house of the agricultural labourers, because there was no fear of their being raided. These labourers used to often ask me, 'what will we get out of this movement? The tenants, instead of two-third share of produce, will get the whole, but our share will not increase. Therefore, why should we support this struggle?' I raised this issue in our Party meeting. We then decided that the *siri's* (labourer's) share should be out of the whole produce, whether that was two-third, as now, or the whole produce when the tenants get their land. This we then put across to the agricultural labourers as well as to the tenants. As for tenants-at-will, we knew that our movement was very weak among them and, therefore, when the question came of distributing the occupied land of landlords who had abandoned their lands and fled to the towns, we

protect the economic interests of different sections and appeals to the self-interest of these sections in an attempt to get their support and ensure their involvement, it is all the same significant that there was no conception of the possibility of any other, at least additional, appeal, such as in terms of what socialism would provide by way of a transformation of the whole quality of life, in its cultural, social, political as well as economic aspects. In other words, political work was seen as synonymous with making economic demands for each section. The emphasis on an appeal to economic self-interest reached such dimensions that even village shopkeepers were promised a share of the windfall, that is, land, in return for support or even neutrality.[15]

This weakness was also evident at a wider political level in the relationship with other political groups and parties and especially the communal groups. The struggle of the Communists against the communal elements, particularly the Akalis, took the form of a frontal attack on the communal Akalis and projection of themselves as the true heirs of the militant Akali tradition. While this was successful to a point, it did leave the ideological basis of communalism firmly entrenched. Communists are superior to Master Tara Singh's Akalis because they are better Akalis; they are better fighters against oppression; they are like the Akalis of old, and not like the present-day corrupt Akalis—so the argument ran. A valid argument, within its context, but it does not reveal the wider logic of communal politics—a logic that was based on the necessity to blur secular and class divisions and create and accentuate those based on religion, community and caste—that led inexorably, as can be seen in the case of Master Tara Singh, towards compromise and collaboration with reactionary, conservative and even anti-national forces. The emphasis on personal corruption, hypocrisy, etc., detracted attention from the more pernicious and deeper roots of communalism—roots which could not be severed without cutting at their very basis; which is the whole notion of the existence of "separate" interests of different communities, which in this case were "Sikh" interests.

Moreover, as described in Chapter 7, when it came to the question of functioning in legislative and electoral politics, the PEPSU Communists thought nothing of entering into political alliances with or extending political support to right-wing, even communal groups, with whom they shared

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gave this occupied land (the landlords' self-cultivated land, not that which tenants already cultivated) to tenants-at-will (and also to agricultural labourers, smaller occupancy tenants as well as small peasant owners)". On the attempt to involve the peasant proprietors, Jagir Singh Joga said: "We used to tell the *malik* kisans that the end of the jagirdari system was essential also for their welfare, because in the existing system only the sons of the landlords got high-level employment, while their sons could not even become policemen".

[15] Interview with Jagir Singh Joga.

nothing in common at the ideological level, against their own erstwhile comrades-in-arms, the left-wing Praja Mandalists (now left-wing Congressmen), with whom they had, on their own testimony, everything in common—belief in socialism, in the *muzara* cause, secularism—except adherence to an organization. They were obviously unable to comprehend the importance of the ideological differentiation between left-wing and right-wing Congressmen and between left-wing Congressmen and Akalis. They could only have comprehended this difference if they had seen their own struggle in ideological–political terms, if they could have understood that any weakening of left influence, whether it was of the left-wing Congressmen or their own and strengthening of the right-wing and communal forces was, in the long-run, bound to retard the growth of even their own influence, since it would provide the opportunity for the right-wing and communal forces to spread their own ideology and influence through control over education, administration, economic policy, cultural policy, etc. However, given their own understanding, which was that "all bourgeois are the same" and the job of Communists is to *use* the contradictions in the bourgeois camp to their own advantage, that is, refuse to make any distinction, on the basis of ideology, between different segments of these "bourgeois" parties, it was quite natural that alliances with right-wing and communal groups were made, whether for extracting minor economic concessions for the peasants or for winning one seat in the Assembly. In other words, politics was not understood in ideological–political or hegemonic terms, but was perceived either in narrowly economistic terms (necessity to secure maximum economic concessions) or in narrowly political terms (in numbers of seats in legislative assemblies).

In fact, it was this combination of the absence of an ideological perspective with the glorification of militancy which forged the logic of inevitable armed struggle and paved the way to the "left adventurist" debacle of 1948–51. The simplistic identification of a genuine revolutionary as one who leads an uncompromising and *continuous* struggle against the establishment (be it the British, the maharaja or Nehru's government), without taking into consideration the questions of commitment to socialism and conception of revolutionary theory and practice under specific circumstances, was a result of a certain ideological–theoretical poverty. This was because no room existed, in such a conception, for the inevitable phases of retreat, compromise and consolidation in any social struggle, as such phases would be dismissed as revisionist by fellow comrades and seen as abandonment by the masses who valued the Communists primarily for their heroic militancy and fighting spirit. The consequence was a strong tendency, as in the Patiala movement (and in Telengana), to continue to push forth on the path of militancy, regardless of external circumstances and changing conditions

(such as Indian Independence), a trend which inevitably led to attempts at armed struggle, or in other words, ultra-leftism. This adventurism was effectively scotched by the state by the simple expedient of repression of activists and weaning away of the masses by concessions. It is ironic that the success of the valiant struggle of Patiala tenants, led by the Communists, to win the right to own the land tilled by them, spelt failure for the Communists, who lost their mass base among the tenantry of Patiala. The peasants clearly gained an important and immediate economic concession; the state, too, wrested a short-term political advantage. What is poignant about the situation is the isolation of the Communists.

The Communists' failure to grasp the importance of ideological–political struggle and its concomitant, the necessity of transformation of peasant consciousness, it needs to be pointed out, was not merely fortuitous or accidental. The overemphasis on militancy and struggle and the under-emphasis on ideological transformation were products of the basic Communist paradigm of a violent insurrectionary overthrow of state power, a paradigm they never questioned at the level of theory despite the overwhelming evidence of their own practice of leading essentially non-violent peasant struggles. The ultimate aim of violent revolution necessitates the building up of militant struggles into a crescendo that will result in the final act of seizure of power. Ideological transformation is not an imperative of this strategic model, as it is of the model of non-violent hegemonic struggle that culminates in a surrender by the opponent. In the latter model—the Gandhian model—cooperation is withdrawn and the strength of feeling demonstrated by a variety of non-violent methods, which include simply wearing *khadi* at one end of the spectrum and civil disobedience and even parallel governments at the other, and then the opponent is forced to surrender—he is not overthrown in a violent insurrection. A transfer of power rather than a seizure of power or the storming of the citadel is the final act in this dramatic form.

By its very logic, therefore, the Gandhian strategic model pushes in the direction of ideological transformation, whereas the Communist model pushes in the direction of militant struggle and is not contingent upon ideological transformation. In the Gandhian model, transformation of consciousness also results in, and is demonstrated to the world at large, through mass struggles, but these struggles are not ends in themselves, and they do not have to be pushed on relentlessly. Further, ideological transformation that does not and cannot get reflected in militant struggle also has a place and a meaning in the Gandhian model, as shown by the example of the Gandhian approach to the Harijans or untouchables, but it has none in the Communist model. A model of insurrectionary overthrow has not much use for old women spinning on their *charkhas* or government servants wearing *khadi*, or a high-caste woman partaking of a meal served

by an untouchable but a hegemonic struggle's life-blood is made up of millions of such "insignificant" actions which are reflections of a transformed consciousness.

It is my contention that because the Communists did not question their own strategic paradigm at the level of theory, because they did not theorise even their own practice of actually leading non-violent peasant struggles, they remained prisoners of their irrelevant theory and were unable to carry forward, to the extent necessary and possible, the task of ideological–political struggle and education which could lead to transformation of peasant consciousness. Since they could not rid themselves of the tyranny of a theory that was acting as a blinker rather than as a magnifying glass, their practice itself was hampered by their ill-fitting strategic paradigm. As a result, they could not fully take even their own ideologies to the peasants who accepted them as their leaders.

The consequences of this tragic feature of Communist experience were not only limited to the weakness of the process of transformation in the aspect of anti-feudal or anti-landlord consciousness. As is apparent from the example of Patiala described earlier, ideological and political struggle for transforming existing consciousness or mediating between narrow economic struggles and the wider social and political struggle was also necessary if these struggles were to become the basis for building up resistance to communalism and casteism, and also if they were not to degenerate into communal and caste warfare, especially in situations where the immediate local enemy could be identified in terms of his separate caste or religious identity. Otherwise agrarian radicalism could easily dissolve into a communal confrontation as in Malabar in 1921 or become the basis of semi-communal or communal politics as in Bengal under the leadership of the Krishak Praja Party, or the same peasants who had fought militant economic battles under Communist leadership could fall prey to communal ideologies and even participate in communal rioting as in Bengal and central Punjab in 1947. In the case of Patiala, the lack of understanding of and emphasis on this aspect on the part of the Communist leaders of the *Muzara* Movement meant that the peasant masses as well as the local-level cadre were always vulnerable to the pull of Akali communal ideology and politics, especially during relatively passive phases of the movement, as well as after they had won their demands and had no further use for militant economic struggles led by Communists. Clearly, the fact that in the process of militant but limited economic struggle they had not been educated into a consciousness of the necessity for a wider social transformation meant that once they achieved their immediate objectives they ceased to be "radical" or "revolutionary", their notions of "radicalism" had never transcended that of achieving their narrow economic aims. This also means that radicalism on economic issues as well as militant economic struggle

including armed struggle do not by themselves automatically lead to revolutionariness, nor are they by themselves a sufficient answer to or bulwark against reactionary ideologies such as communalism and casteism. It is not as if once the masses got involved in class struggle on economic issues and on the basis of existing consciousness, they would automatically be shielded from communal and casteist forces, as was naively believed and hoped for by various sections of the left, including Nehru, in the 1930s and 1940s. They could be shielded from such reactionary ideologies only if they simultaneously underwent a process of ideological–political transformation that enabled them to see their problems and struggles in a wider perspective as well as comprehend the reactionary and anti-people nature of communal and casteist ideologies. They could do this only if their national and class consciousness was significantly advanced, as well as their awareness of the real nature of communalism, etc.

Nor has enough attention been devoted to the question of the role of caste and other traditional ideologies in the peasants' consciousness and their significance, negative and positive, for peasant mobilization in the period under study. Marxists have tended, by and large, to ignore these questions, and the omission is a serious one. The "subalternists", who claim to be more interested in issues and things that were close to the peasantry, have only succeeded, as usual, in bifurcating the "élite" caste movements from "subaltern" caste consciousness,[16] without telling us very much about the actual and precise significance of the ideology of caste in its many incarnations. Some of these incarnations are relatively harmless, such as endogamy, but others are clearly pernicious, such as untouchability and the curse of landlessness. And then there are still others, which are more ambiguous, such as solidarity with caste-fellows which could be positive when used to fight against discriminatory caste practices or upper-caste oppression, but could have negative implications when articulated with a casteist ideology even if the ostensible purpose is to "empower" the lower castes (a good example being the Mandalization of Indian politics today). It is definitely negative when utilized to keep down castes that are lower in the social hierarchy, an example being social boycott of rebellious untouchables by landowning peasant castes, as happened in the case of the Balmikis in Baghiana Village in 1927 (see Chapter 2), or when used to split the people on caste lines during the anti-imperialist struggle, as was sought to be done by the British in Punjab by creating the categories of agriculturist and non-agriculturist castes and in the Madras Presidency by reserving seats on the basis of Brahmin versus non-Brahmin and encouraging the non-Brahmins to support the loyalist Justice Party.

[16] See Sarkar, *Modern India*, pp. 54–58, 158–62, 242–44.

A tentative hypothesis on the role and significance of caste and caste-based ideologies may be suggested. Just as religion or religiosity when limited to the private life of individuals is not per se equivalent to or even the cause of communalism but nevertheless is prone to being utilized for the purposes of communalism, similarly caste, when limited to the spheres of marriage, food habits, dress and the like, and except in the form of untouchability and perpetual landlessness, is not per se equivalent to casteism or caste oppression or caste-based discrimination, but nevertheless is open to being used for the latter purposes. Further, like religion and traditional religion-based ideologies (and especially the egalitarian elements in such ideologies), whether they be the notions of Ram Rajya or Khilafat, or the anti-*mahant* Akali ideology, or the ideology of the Farazi Movement, caste too provides an initial basis for solidarity and common action, especially in periods and in societies which are in the process of transition to modern politics and politics based on modern ideologies and modern forms of organization. However, while such ideologies may be useful and perhaps inevitable as mediations or as a mediatory mechanism in the process of transition from traditional to modern politics, they have to be simultaneously and sooner rather than later transcended and not allowed to become structured parts of modern politics. The transcendence is necessary precisely because of the potential they contain within themselves of being used as handmaidens of reactionary politics and ideologies or of being absorbed and incorporated into the ideological discourse of reactionary and divisive politics. The call of caste solidarity can be used to mobilize ready support against oppression and no doubt it often performed this role—in the UP in 1918–22, in the Bardoli and Kheda districts of Gujarat, in Bihar and in many others parts of India.[17] And when it did, it must be recognized as having done precisely that. But, simultaneously, the ideology of caste ultimately, in the long run, acts as a brake on wider peasant unity and must therefore

[17] Kathleen Gough notes that "at least two Indian authors have indeed argued that the caste system provided a framework for the organizating of peasant rebellions, since in many cases peasants were able to assemble quickly through the medium of their caste assemblies". The two authors she cites are Irfan Habib and E.M.S. Namboodiripad. The role of caste is clear also in her account of the movement in Tanjore: "In Tanjore, Harijans (Adi-Dravidas) form about one-third of the population and live in segregated streets on the outskirts or the village. The communists organised these streets into unions on the basis of their existing caste-assemblies. The Adi-Dravidas acted separately, although in alliance with the unions of higher ranking middle and poor peasants...." Gough, "Indian Peasant Uprisings", and "Peasants Resistance and Revolt in South India", in A.R. Desai, *Peasant Struggles in India*, pp. 87, 118, 727. Majid Siddiqi has noted for Avadh in 1918–1922 that "the existence of castes helped the peasant movement to proceed with greater cohesion and speed...." *Agrarian Unrest in North India*, p. 214. Blair B. Kling describes the various kinds of social boycott adopted by the different castes of peasants in the Indigo Rebellion. *The Blue Mutiny*, pp. 178–79. In Bardoli, in 1928, boycott by caste and village assemblies helped to bring the waverers and weaklings into line. Shirin Mehta, *The Peasantry and Nationalism*, pp. 187–88.

be transcended if peasants belonging to different castes were to be integrated with each other, or with those of other castes who belonged to their economic stratum or class, just as religion-based ideologies had to be transcended if Indians belonging to different religious faiths were to be united in common struggle, whether national or class.

In our view, therefore, caste and other similar ideologies could be studied as mediatory forms, their usefulness and positive contribution depending in fact on the rapidity with which they were transcended or gave way to other secular and modern forms and ideologies, such as those based on nation, class, culture, etc. The longer such mediatory forms were used or allowed to exist the greater the danger of their being used not as mediatory towards more secular forms, but in new roles which used their reactionary and divisive aspects while burying their egalitarian, unifying ones. But this can be done only if they are not seen as inviolate and inherent parts of "subaltern" or peasant consciousness which should not be disturbed by the élite in "its" struggle for nationalism and socialism. For if the use of the categories of nation and class is seen as an unwarranted intrusion or imposition by the élites onto a subaltern consciousness based on the categories of caste, religious community, regional linguistic nationality and the like, then the very task of transforming or transcending the latter would be seen as an "illegitimate" attempt by the élites to impose their own notions on the subalterns. (I discuss this at length a little later.)

It is possible that a perspective incorporating some of the elements I have outlined here may prove more fruitful in analyzing and understanding peasant consciousness and the problem of its transformation than a perspective which sees the peasants as simultaneously having diverse and even contradictory forms of consciousness—class, communal, caste, regional, national—but instead of trying to ask the question as to how these co-exist, prefers to lump them together and describe them as the "collective mentality" of a group, class, or region.[18]

In my view, it would be first necessary to examine what precisely were the forms of consciousness of any group at a particular point in time, whether these were, in fact, contradictory or complementary in the given context. For example, in the case of India, in the colonial period, national, regional and class consciousness were not contradictory to each other but complementary—national consciousness both contributed to and was enriched by sentiments of regional cultural regeneration; national consciousness was also a pre-requisite for and pushed forward the process of the formation of all-India classes and groups, the Indian working class, the Indian peasantry, the Indian capitalist class, the Indian intelligentsia and the like.

[18] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 4. Also see my discussion of Sarkar's approach in Chapter 11.

Therefore, the coexistence of national, regional and class consciousness is no paradox in the context of colonial India; these were not necessarily contradictory forms of consciousness.

But communal and, to a lesser extent, caste consciousness were certainly contradictory to national, regional and class consciousness.[19] Did these contradictory forms of consciousness just coexist within the same group or did they at least coexist in tension? Did the existence of one signal the imperfect or weak penetration of the other? For example, would we simply say in the case of the Patiala *muzaras* that communal and class consciousness coexisted in their minds? Or would we be more correct if we said that their militant economic struggle was not a sufficient proof of their having acquired a real class consciousness, that is, they did not see their problems vis-à-vis *biswedars* in class terms of tenants versus feudal landlords but only in terms of their asserting their traditional rights to the land, which had been expropriated by the landlords. In this case, then, their class consciousness was very weak and was not a sufficient barrier to the entry of communal consciousness.

Also, in their case, unlike the peasants of many areas of British Punjab, their national consciousness was also very weak—they had never formed part of any broad anti-imperialist movement except the Akali Movement of the early 1920s, and a major section of the Akalis having become communal by 1930s and 1940s, the peasants, not having been effectively warned against the transformed ideology of the Akalis, constantly and repeatedly fell prey to communalism.

Therefore, what we have here is not a paradoxical symbiotic coexistence of contradictory forms of consciousness, but a situation in which weak penetration of certain forms creates the space for the growth of other contradictory forms. In other words, the Patiala peasants were not simultaneously equally nationalist, communal and class conscious. Their national as well as class consciousness was insufficiently developed and, therefore, whenever their economic interests did not indicate a line-up behind Communist and left nationalist leadership, they began to turn to and provide space for communal ideologies and politics. Obviously, the fact that in their economic struggle they received support and leadership from the Communists and left nationalists and not from the communal Akalis, was not sufficient, in itself, to convince them that Akali ideology and politics were bad or not in their interest and that Communists and left

[19] That communal and class consciousness are not complementary but contradictory is shown by the example of the Tebhaga Movement. The rising tide of Muslim communalism in the 1940s contributed to the weakness of the Tebhaga Movement by weaning away the Muslim peasantry who formed an important section of the social base of the Kisan Sabha and isolating the cadres of the Kisan Sabha who were mostly Hindu. See, for example, Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution", p. 706.

nationalists deserved their long-term support. They could have reached that conclusion only if it had simultaneously been explained to them that the Akalis' lack of support to their economic struggle was part of the wider logic and reactionary character of communal ideology and politics and that Communist and left nationalist politics was in their interest not only because it gave support to their immediate economic demands but because it aimed at a fundamental and long-term transformation of their economic, political, social and cultural life. But in the absence of their acquiring national and class consciousness, once their immediate economic demands were satisfied, they were liable to fall prey to communal consciousness.Therefore, what we see is not just a coexistence of contradictory consciousness within a group or class or region, as Sumit Sarkar would have it, but a weakening of one type and a strengthening of the other.

"Subaltern" scholars are, however, extremely wary of attempts to study the nature of the linkages between different elements of consciousness. For example, Pandey objects to communalism at the popular level being studied in terms of its relationship and linkages with nationalism, working-class struggle, advance towards socialism and democracy.[20] Historians of the subalterns may well be able to afford the luxury of ignoring these linkages, but they might at least be less judgemental about the concerns of those like the veteran Communist leader Satyapal Dang (who not only writes about but lives among the "subalterns" in a working-class suburb of Amritsar in Punjab) for whom these linkages—between communalism and imperialism, nationalism, socialism and working-class struggles—are a matter of life and death. Even otherwise, Pandey's position assumes, quite arbitrarily on behalf of the "subalterns" that the histories of nationalism, socialism, democracy, etc., are somehow a less important component of subaltern history than the histories of religion or communalism. Even more insidious is his suggestion that the distinction sought to be made between the economic, political and religious spheres of life is relevant for the study of advanced capitalist societies but not for the study of the presumably "backward" peoples of the Indian subcontinent such as the weavers of Midnapore. A strange "Orientalism" is abroad here, for while he objects to historians assigning "a greater or lesser rationalism to different classes of men" within the same society, he does not hesitate to distinguish the "rationalism" of men (and women) belonging to advanced capitalist societies and those belonging to the "backward" underdeveloped countries.[21] If one was to follow Pandey's prescription, one would have to accept that the framework and tools of analyzis needed for studying

[20] Gyanendra Pandey, "Liberalism and the Study of Indian History", in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 18, 42, 15 October, 1983.
[21] *Ibid.*

phenomena such as racism, anti-Semitism and the Catholic–Protestant divide, when these occur in the advanced West, must be qualitatively different from those used for analyzing similar phenomena, such as communalism, casteism, linguism and the like, when they occur in the "backward" East.[22] Are there no parallels possible between the race riots in Los Angeles and neo-nazi attacks by white youths in Germany and communal rioting in India in the wake of the Ayodhya issue, all of which took place in the same year of the Lord, 1992?

Similarly, Dipesh Chakrabarty has the notion that "the 'codes' of politics in the 'subaltern' domain derive from power-relationships and ideological formations that *pre-date colonialism*" and that for that reason all consciousness including religious/communal consciousness at the popular level has to be studied in terms of its own "internal logic" and not in terms of its linkages with the specific historical context of colonialism.[23] There is an in-built assumption here that all aspects of subaltern consciousness were continuations from the pre-colonial past; this assumption is a given of the subaltern framework: it does not have to be validated by historical evidence of the existence of any particular aspect of consciousness in the pre-colonial past. There is no room for the possibility that while some aspects of subaltern consciousness may be continuations from the pre-colonial epochs, others may not be continuations or may have been so transfigured as to signify new "power-relationships and ideological formations".

Will Dipesh Chakrabarty then argue that the religious consciousness expressed in the Catholic–Protestant conflict in Northern Ireland be removed from the historical context of British colonialism in Ireland or that racial consciousness expressed in the black–white conflict in the United States of America be distanced from the historical context of American capitalism and be studied in terms of their "internal logic"? Would he argue that in their case, too, the logic of these "'uncomfortable' aspects of popular mentality"[24] lies outside the logic of the bourgeois structure and derives from "power-relationships and ideological formations that pre-date"

[22] Pandey's position on this question is a very good example of the regression being made by the "subalternists" in historical analysis. (Perhaps this regression is intended as a proof of their faith in the post-modernist notion of the undesirability of progress.) Even R.P. Dutt, many decades ago, could see the obvious similarities between religious conflict, racism and anti-Semitism in Europe and communalism in India. (See his *India Today*, pp. 453–54, for an elaboration of his framework). But the subalterns, while they have no hesitation is carrying forward and even adding to the sectarianism present in R.P. Dutt's framework—which is what they do most of the time despite their loud condemnations of Marxist historiography as yet another "élite" creation—they unhesitatingly reject the positive aspects of the Marxist approach.

[23] Dipesh Chakrabarty, "Discussion: Invitation to a Dialogue", in Ranajit Guha, ed., *Subaltern Studies IV: Writings on South Asian History and Politics,* Delhi, 1985, pp. 373, 375.

[24] *Ibid.,* p. 373.

capitalism? And in any case, studying these consciousnesses in terms of their "internal logic" is not likely to be of much aid in the task of their transformation.

Partha Chatterjee goes a step further and declares that he will not "regard 'communalism' as a problem and 'secularism' as the answer", for that is "a profoundly liberal enterprise" in which, unfortunately, progressive historians in India have also participated and he has no intentions of joining their ranks. The problematic of communalism/secularism is a consequence of communalist and secular "appropriation" of subaltern actions which were "neither 'communal' nor 'secular'... for those categories were quite irrelevant to the political world of the second domain". For him, accepting communalism as a problem is tantamount to participating in "writing the autobiography of the Indian state", for communalism, it seems, is a problem that need worry only the Indian state, others who worry about it only stand witness to "the ideological success of the Indian state leadership that ... has been able to ingrain this aspect of its self-definition in the[ir] minds…."[25]

On his part, he would rather prefer to break up "the ideological unity of the history of the Indian state" by setting it against "a different history, or rather several different histories—those of the various Indian nationalities and perhaps also of other communities whose incorporation into the historical process of nationality formation in India has remained fragmented or ambiguous".[26]

Thus, in his view, there is no such thing as communal consciousness at the popular or subaltern level and, second, even if he were to recognize its existence, there is no question of his being concerned with the problem of its transformation, because the only consciousness that he wants to transform is that of the Indian nation and all those other consciousnesses which might come in handy in that project, whether they be communal or linguistic/regional or caste, would logically be in no need of transformation. Thus, for him, the only really "illegitimate" category for the study and writing of Indian history is that of the Indian nation, a category he collapses, without any explanation, with that of the Indian state and the only really "legitimate" categories are those of community regional nationality, etc., whose histories should be "set against" the history of the nation.

It is also necessary to remind ourselves that it was our colonial rulers who first purveyed this ideology: that the "Western" concept of nation could not apply to India because it was a society structured around the "traditional" identities of religion, language, race, caste, and the like. The colonial rulers' motivation was clear: they sought to use this ideology, this version of "history", to deny legitimacy to the anti-imperialist nationalism

[25] Partha Chatterjee, *Bengal, 1920–47,* pp. lii–liii.
[26] *Ibid*., pp. xxxvi–xxxvii.

of the Indian people and thus legitimize their own rule; one can, however, only wonder about the motivation of those who continue today to purvey this essentially colonial and status quoist understanding of Indian society. Thus, for Chatterjee, communalism is not a problem that needs a solution, but on the contrary provides a "strategic level" from which the "unity" of the Indian state can be breached.

Sarkar, as usual, demonstrating a greater sensitivity than most of his "subaltern" friends, recognizes the linkages between different elements of popular consciousness. But sadly, he too fails to explore the *nature* of these inter-relationships and linkages. He notes that "the oscillation between united class action and caste or communal conflicts was never entirely overcome, even the great Girni Kamgar strike in Bombay in 1928 being followed within a few months by a communal riot", but does not then ask the question as to why it happened this way. He tends to, instead, accept this oscillation as almost inevitable—a proof of "the persistence of pre-industrial traditions", which is "nothing peculiar to the Indian working class". In his view, the "Indian tribals and peasants, or dispossessed tribals, peasants and artisans sucked into factories", unlike the British working class which was helped by the existence of a rich tradition of artisanal radicalism, "had little to fall back upon except sectional, and often divisive, ties of kinship, region, caste or religion".[27] Even if we accept this to be true, does it not imply that these were impediments to the growth of consciousness based on class lines, though they might not have been impediments, at certain times, to what Sumit Sarkar calls "united class action"? Does this not imply that "united class action" does not by itself lead to class consciousness but leaves the room open for persistence of traditional or other modern identities such as communalism, and that, therefore, the role of ideological transformation, a task that could perhaps only be performed by establishing links with advanced modern ideologies of anti-imperialism, secularism and socialism, becomes crucial? Could the transformation from "united class action" to "class consciousness" be achieved without the help of those who had grasped and evolved these advanced ideologies? Could it be done "autonomously"?

And further, could these elements of subaltern consciousness, which acted in the long run as impediments to or limitations on the growth of class consciousness, be transformed without being *analytically* separated from other elements of subaltern consciousness, which were not in need of such transformation? And even if one dispensed with "objectionable" terms such as "false" or "true" consciousness, would the distinction between the different elements, those that need to be retained and those that need to be transformed, not have to be established on some "objective" basis? And, if

[27] Sarkar, *Popular Movements and Middle Class Leadership*, p. 27.

one refused to make any such distinction on the "subjective" and empiricist basis that "the separation was obviously very far from clear to contemporaries",[28] should not one also then concede that it amounts to an abandonment of any perspective of transformation?

Peasant Historiography: Theoretical Premises

The problem of transformation of peasant consciousness is an issue that has attracted inadequate attention not only in literature dealing with peasant protest and resistance in colonial India but also in those studies that generalize on the basis of the experience of peasants in the modern world, with the historical material coming largely from the periphery of the world capitalist system where peasants in the twentieth-century still survived as "peasants". Paradoxically, this is perhaps as true of those who believe that peasants are not hegemonized by "élite" or ruling class ideologies as it is of those who believe they are.

The lack of concern with the question of transformation of consciousness is easily understandable in the first case. For the "subalternists", and for those like James Scott, who hold that élite ideological hegemony over peasants is non-existent, the issue is clearly irrelevant, for there is nothing that needs transformation or can be transformed. For "subalternists", it is the history of violent rebellion by the peasants that stands as proof. For Scott it is the essentially non-violent everyday resistance that furnishes the evidence: but the conclusion is the same. Peasants, whose consciousness is already imbued with an ideology of resistance to élite domination, do not need to transform their consciousness—whether from traditional to modern, or from feudal to anti-feudal.[29] This assumption, then, precludes any engagement with the issue of transformation, of its possibility, its desirability, or necessity or modality.

In the case of studies of the peasantry that are *not* imbued with the assumption of the absence of the hegemony of "élite" or ruling class ideologies, a different set of factors appear to have been responsible for the lack of interest in the subject of transformation. One reason why they do not by and large address the issue of transformation of consciousness could be because, at least in their view, this was not on the historical agenda of their protagonists. In other words, perhaps the historical experience that forms the basis

[28] *Ibid*., p. 4.

[29] The understanding of James Scott and of the subalternists on this issue has already been discussed at length in Chapter 10, Section I, above. Hence, I am not elaborating on it here.

of their generalizations was not of a kind, or at least they thought it was not of a kind, that necessitated a study of transformation of consciousness.

As already stated, these studies concentrate on the historical experience of the peasantries of countries that were in the periphery of the world capitalist system, either as colonies or semi-colonies (China, Vietnam, Algeria, Cuba) or as backward capitalist economies (Russia, Mexico) and where, therefore, the peasantries had *not* been sent into oblivion as a result of the onward march of capitalism. They have as their historical case material examples of revolutionary transformations in which the peasants played revolutionary *roles,* because their revolts dovetailed with the resistance being led by other sections but without undergoing a "revolutionary" transformation of their consciousness.

These peasant revolts or "wars", to use Wolf's term, were seen as actuated essentially by the desire of peasants to remain "traditional", to defend the encroachments being made on their rights and to protest against the disruption of their life by the forces unleashed by Western capitalism.[30] In fact, "revisionist" radical historiography such as that of Wolf , or Alavi, or Hobsbawm, is revisionist precisely because it questioned, and in my view rightly, the then reigning orthodoxy of the Maoist or Frantz Fanon variety which claimed that peasants—and especially poor peasants—in colonial countries were inherently revolutionary or had indeed become imbued with a true class or revolutionary socialist consciousness in the course of their participation in "revolutionary" struggles—in China, or in Algeria, or in Vietnam, or Cuba.[31] But the problem is not with the fact that it questioned

[30] The best example of the kind of studies I am referring to is Eric Wolf's *Peasant Wars,* which generalizes on the basis of the experience of the peasantry in the Russian, Chinese, Cuban, Algerian, Mexican and Vietnamese revolutions. Hamza Alavi, in his article on "Peasants and Revolution", which first put forward the middle peasant thesis, focuses mainly on the question of whether middle or poor peasants play the leading role in peasant revolts and does not make the causal connections that Wolf later made between the middle peasants being traditional and, therefore, revolutionary. E.J. Hobsbawm, in his seminal article, "Peasants and Politics", in the inaugural issue of the *Journal of Peasant Studies,* 1, 1, October 1973, takes a position on this question very similar to that of Wolf. Other studies of a comparative nature, which do not qualify as "peasant studies" but nevertheless address the issues of the role of peasants in major societal transformations in the modern world, of which the best examples are the classic study by Barrington Moore, Jr., *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy: Lord and Peasant in the Making of the Modern World,* Harmondsworth, 1967, and more recently the extremely persuasive analysis of Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions,* do not really concern themselves, though for different reasons, with the question of the consciousness of the peasants. Their focus is at best on the "roles" played by the peasants in facilitating or retarding the larger transformations in which they are interested, not on the ideas in the heads of the peasants while they were playing these "roles".

[31] See, for example, Alavi's opening paragraphs in his article on "Peasants and Revolution", p. 671, where he first quotes from Frantz Fanon and then critiques him, as well as his discussion in later pages of Mao's position.

the claims of this orthodoxy, but with the fact that it then proceeded to suggest, though not always in an unequivocal manner, that this proved that peasant consciousness was inevitably and necessarily fated to remain "traditional" or untransformed.[32] The new historiography tended to transform what was at best the actual experience of peasants in some countries into something like a universal theory of peasant behaviour, it tended to translate historical fact into historical necessity.

The understanding appears to be that, as was supposed to have happened in Western Europe with the onset of capitalism, peasants would either dissolve into different classes and then their consciousness would be transformed as part of the transformation in their class position or belonging, or they would remain "untransformed" or "traditional" in their consciousness.

Hobsbawm, for example, while discussing the peasants' transition from traditional to modern politics in Europe, argues that in the initial period of liberal modern politics, the ideology of the peasantry tends to remain traditional—it is informed by allegiance to the church, the king and to proto-nationalism—and they get mobilized on the side of the political right-wing. It is only later, as a consequence of "economic changes, urbanisation, migration", that the transformation begins to take place.[33] To be fair to Hobsbawm, he does raise the possibility of an alternative scenario, by pointing to the fact that in Sicily and southern Italy peasants did accept the leadership of the political left led by Garibaldi "long before industrialization and urbanisation had seriously affected them". He does not, however, explore this possibility further and leaves it with a peremptory remark that "about this question we remain very much in the dark, and further research is needed".[34] This is somewhat surprising, for many years earlier, Hobsbawm had studied the peasant movement in Sicily which was integrated into left-wing politics towards the end of the nineteenth-century.[35] Or perhaps, it is not so surprising because the emphasis, even in that analysis,

[32] As stated earlier in footnote 30 of this chapter, Alavi's position on this issue is different from that of Wolf and also of Hobsbawm, in that he does not talk of the "traditional" aspect of the middle peasant's position, but instead focuses on the question of his economic independence as the reason for his ability to play a revolutionary, etc. Therefore, the question of his generalizing in terms of the inevitability of peasant consciousness remaining traditional does not arise. My critique of Alavi's position is different—he links revolutionariness only with economic independence and does not raise the question of transformation or non-transformation of consciousness. By a different route, he then falls also into the same paradigm—it is the capacity to play a revolutionary "role" that is important and not the conciousness.

[33] Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics", pp. 16–21.

[34] *Ibid*., p. 18.

[35] See Hobsbawm, *Primitive Rebels: Studies in Archaic Forms of Social Movement in the 19th and 20th Centuries*, New York, 1965 (first published 1959), Chapter 6.

was on economic changes and the provision of a modern organizational structure by the left parties as the critical new elements, and in the analysis of peasant consciousness, the emphasis was more on the continuities in millenarian traditions rather than on the new modern elements.[36]

Similarly, the historical fact that the English peasantry did not play an immediate, direct role in the pro-monarchical, anti-feudal transformation of the fifteenth-century and that it could not, as a peasantry, play a role in the anti-absolutist, democratic transformation initiated in the seventeenth-century—because by then it was already differentiated into different classes as a consequence of the growth of agrarian capitalism[37]—has been often seen as a proof of the inability of the peasantry to acquire a class consciousness, or to transform its consciousness from traditional to modern, or feudal to anti-feudal. This view has, however, been strongly challenged by Rodney Hilton, the British Marxist historian, who argues that medieval European peasants not only had "moments" of class consciousness, which was mostly negative in that it was against the lords, but also furnish an example of positive class consciousness in the famous English rising of 1381. In this movement, in which peasants participated along with other sections of society, they formulated demands which included the abolition of serfdom and also had a vision of an alternative state in the form of a popular monarchy with no intermediaries between the monarch and the peasants, thus exhibiting a positive class consciousness.[38]

Similarly, for France, the idea that peasant actions in the Revolution of 1789 were informed only with the notion of removing the excessive burdens imposed by the "feudal reaction" or by *parvenu* landowners and that peasants were "modernized" only in the nineteenth-century, has been brought into question, among others, most recently by John Markoff, who argues that peasant demands, as reflected in the *cahiers* drawn up in 40,000 parishes all over the country a few months before the "revolution" broke out, demonstrate that peasant attitudes had embedded in them the notions of equity and of proto citizenship, that there was even a notion of "France", and that peasants were very clear about what they wanted abolished—such as the claims of the lords and the Church—and what they wanted reformed—such as the taxes imposed by the centralized state.[39] The point

[36] *Ibid*.

[37] See Christopher Hill, *Reformation to Industrial Revolution: A Social and Economic History of Britain, 1530–1780*, Harmondsworth, 1969, pp. 47–60, 70.

[38] See especially Hilton, "The Peasantry as a Class", in Rodney Hilton, *The English Peasantry in the Late Middle Ages*, Oxford, 1975 and Hilton, *Bond Men Made Free*.

[39] See John Markoff, "Peasants Protest". For a brief and clear statement of the point of view that Markoff is refuting, see George V. Taylor, "Revolutionary and Non-Revolutionary Content in the Cahiers de Doleances of 1789: An Interim Report", *French Historical Studies*, 7, Fall 1972.

that I wish to make is that Hilton and Markoff demonstrate that, even for the English and the French peasantries, the possibility that their consciousness was capable of being, and perhaps was, transformed in a modern direction, *even while they were still recognizable as peasants*, is not foreclosed. And thus they question the ahistorical notion of an invariant peasant consciousness.

However, in the case of the revisionist studies of the peasantries of the twentieth-century that have inhabited the countries on the periphery of the world capitalist system, the possibility that peasants could remain peasants and yet undergo changes in their consciousness in a "modern" or "revolutionary" direction was not seriously considered—possibly because the historical material did not provide any grounds for the consideration of this possibility. Communist-led revolutions in China, or Vietnam, or Algeria, or Cuba, were possibly not, as argued with great persuasion, examples of such a transformation. It is extremely likely that peasants did revolt in these countries primarily with the objective of defending the older moral economy, that their allegiance to the revolutionary parties was a consequence not of their adoption of the ideologies held by these parties or forces but of the fact that these parties provided them with the necessary organizational framework and leadership in their revolts and/or also because once these revolutionary forces had won significant victories against the entrenched order and had acquired a significant armed strength it was expedient for peasants to throw in their lot with those in whose favour the balance of power had tilted and who looked likely to emerge as the future power-wielders.

Though even here I would like to enter the *caveat* that while peasants in China, or Vietnam, or Algeria may not have adopted modern radical ideologies and thus had not acquired a modern class consciousness or a socialist consciousness, the chances that they had absorbed the nationalist or national liberationist ideologies, which were a part of the ideological discourse of the leaders and parties that led them into resistance, are very great. In this respect, then, their consciousness had probably been transformed, though it may not have been transformed in its class aspects. The inability to see this aspect of ideological transformation as significant and the hesitation to incorporate it into the theoretical framework, stems from certain other assumptions that have been a part of the Marxist and radical framework, as I shall argue a little later.

In fact, while this revisionist historiography, in my view, rightly questions the claims of communist revolutionaries that they had actually transformed peasants in their own image and shows that they had not, it tends to place the responsibility for this lack of transformation at the door of, or at least explains the fact of lack of change by pointing to, what may be called the inherent characteristics of the peasantry, such as its traditionalism, or its

ability to only fight defensive actions for restoring the old order, etc., and not by pointing to the inability or failure of the communists or other revolutionaries in successfully transforming the consciousness of peasants. Mao may well be wrong in claiming that the Chinese peasants had become class conscious socialist revolutionaries or that poor peasants because of their class position were inherently revolutionary with a near socialist "new democratic" consciousness and played the leading role in communist-led peasant movements in China and Wolf and Alavi and Bianco and others are right in questioning those claims. But when this gets accompanied, in the case of some of these writers, by suggestions that peasants were bound, by their very nature, to remain traditional, or that it was in their attempt to remain traditional that they were revolutionary,[40] then the terrain of argument precludes any consideration of the possibility that it was not the peasants' own characteristics but the revolutionaries' limitations or the revolutionaries' characteristics that perhaps also thwarted the possibilities of transformation.

Hobsbawm takes a slightly different view in that he refuses to place too much importance on the issue of whether "peasants are fighting for an entirely different and new society or for the adjustment of the old" and is content to assert that "revolutions may be made *de facto* by peasants who do not deny the legitimacy of the existing power structure" and that "the major difference lies not in the theoretical aspirations of the peasantry but in the practical political conjuncture in which they operate".[41] He thus dismisses the question of the consciousness with which peasants make a revolution as of little consequence and thus "privileges" the act of revolt. While this may be a valid argument if one stops analyzing history at the point of the victory of the revolution, its inadequacy becomes apparent if one takes a peep into post-revolutionary history. Surely the peasants' consciousness could not have been inconsequential in shaping their ability to play lesser or greater political roles, in their capacity to influence post-revolutionary economic, political, social and cultural change? In the Indian case at least, as argued elsewhere in this chapter, there was a clear relationship between the nature of peasant resistance and consciousness in pre-Independence India and the nature of the post-Independence social and political structure.

Further assumptions have logically followed in many of the writings from this notion of the inherent nature or special characteristics of the peasantry. A tradition-bound peasantry whose consciousness is untransformed and even untransformable can, logically, only be mobilized around local, or immediate, or parochial, or narrow economic issues. Its struggles must

[40] To quote Wolf's classic statement: "It is the very attempt of the middle and free peasant to remain traditional which makes him revolutionary". *Peasant Wars*, p. 292.

[41] Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics", pp. 12–13.

inevitably be seen to have only a localized focus. It is incapable of responding to larger ideological issues that are of wider societal significance. The societal significance of the local struggles emerges only because on the one hand they are responses to larger societal changes or displacements or crises and because they get linked, via the intelligentsia, or leadership, or political party, or army, or some charismatic individual, with other struggles taking place in society. The links are basically organizational and not ideological and it is the organizational unity and temporal simultaneity of the peasant struggles with other struggles—of workers, of other urban elements, of the intelligentsia and the like—that gives them a national or societal character and wider significance as harbingers of major societal transformations—not the similarity of aims or ideology, nor any shared perceptions of the past or common visions of the future.

Given this understanding, Eric Wolf, for example, argues that "transcendental ideological issues appear only in very prosaic guise in the villages", or that "peasants may join in a national movement in order to settle scores which are age-old in their village or region", or that the mobilization of peasants "is less an outcome of nationwide circumstances than of particular local features".[42]

Similarly, E.J. Hobsbawm,[43] after elaborating upon the peasants' inability to see very far beyond, or transcend their 'little worlds', raises the question, "let us consider whether there can be such a thing as a national peasant movement or a national peasant revolt or uprising", and answers, "I very much doubt it". He then goes on to say:

> Local and regional action, which is the norm, turns into wider action only by external force—natural, economic, political or ideological—and only when a very large number of communities or villages are simultaneously moved in much the same direction. But even when such widespread general action occurs, it rarely coincides with the area of the state (as seen from above), even in quite small states, and it will be less a single general movement than a conglomeration of local and regional movements whose unity is momentary and fragile.... The greatest peasant movements all appear to be regional, or coalitions of regional movements.... This is not to underestimate the great force of such conglomerate movements. If unified by some outside force—a national crisis and breakdown, a sympathetic reformist or revolutionary government, or a single nationally organized and effective party or organization, they may make the difference between success and failure for major revolutions. Even by themselves they may make an agrarian system or the structure of rule in the countryside unviable.... In practice, of course, it may not

[42] Wolf, *Peasant Wars,* p. xv.

[43] All the quotes in this para are from Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics", pp. 9–13.

> make a great deal of difference whether the peasants are fighting for an entirely different and new society or for the adjustment of the old, which normally means either the defence of the traditional society against some threat or the restoration of the old ways which, if sufficiently far in the past, may merely amount to a traditionalist formulation of revolutionary aspirations. Revolutions may be made *de facto* by peasants who do not deny the legitimacy of the existing power structure, law, the state, and even the landlords.... The major difference lies not in the theoretical aspirations of the peasantry, but in the practical political conjuncture in which they operate.

A further corollary is often added to this picture of a "traditional" peasantry that is, in its own consciousness, capable at best of struggling for a "restoration" of the old order and that too at the local level with immediate, directly visible, primarily economic issues constituting the main focus of its concerns. The corollary comes in the form of an assumption that has been a staple of Marxist understanding and practice in colonial or semi-colonial or neo-colonial societies faced simultaneously with the problems or projects of national liberation and social revolution. This assumption, very briefly, is that peasants (and other classes—workers, petty-bourgeoisie and the like) can and must be first mobilized and organized around immediate class or economic demands or issues and only later can they become part of the struggle for national liberation. This sequence is considered necessary and inviolate and not merely a historical fact (in some cases), or a historical possibility (in others). The origins of this assumption also lie most probably in Maoist theory, though not so certainly in Maoist practice, which quite happily reversed the sequence when it was necessary, though without necessarily re-examining the theory. Surprisingly, even those who have questioned other aspects of Maoist theory or claims, such as poor peasants being the most revolutionary and of peasants having acquired a "true" class, or anti-feudal, or socialist consciousness, do not question this aspect of orthodoxy. Of course, one reason for this may well be that while the questioning of the other aspects does not involve a questioning of Marxist orthodoxy but only of its Maoist or Frantz Fanonian variant, questioning of the notion of the inevitable primacy of economic issues in the consciousness of human beings, in this case peasants, would involve a basic questioning of Marxist orthodoxy itself—a task most Marxists have been unwilling to undertake till propelled, very recently, by cataclysmic changes.[44]

[44] In our own country, even these strong tremors have failed to have an effect on sections of left or radical.

However, whatever the reasons, the fact remains that there has been no questioning of the basic Marxist notion that economic or class struggles (the two being often seen as synonymous) must precede, that they are a necessary first step in the building up of a wider societal movement for social transformation. For the colonial countries, this notion gets translated into a theory that enjoins upon revolutionaries that they must *first* mobilize the peasants (and others) into anti-feudal or anti-landlord struggles, that is, into local struggles against local, immediate oppressors, as it is only after this has been done that the different classes can be brought into a "united front" or common anti-imperialist struggle.

Little wonder then that Hobsbawm, in an otherwise extremely perceptive and insightful essay on peasants caught in the process of transition to modern politics, could write, as late as 1973, despite the entire experience of the national liberation movements that have spanned the twentieth-century and on whose backs most "socialist" revolutions rode to victory:[45] "Contrary to what might be supposed, straightforward modern nationalist agitation is likely to capture the peasants rather later than social agitation, unless in the form of simple xenophobia which may be just as easily turned against outgroups belonging to the same 'nation'". To be fair to Hobsbawm, it must be noted that he accepts that "straightforward nationalist agitation" can "capture the peasants", a possibility totally denied by many others, including our "subaltern" friends, for whom nationalism is an inherently "bourgeois" or "élite" ideology which can at best legitimately reach only the upper strata of the peasants who are themselves bourgeois or "élite", whereas for the "subalterns" or the non-rich peasants, it can only be, at best, a false consciousness, or an unwelcome "élite" imposition. What is problematic in Hobsbawm's formulation cited here is the insistence on the likely sequence in which "social",—which in Marxist terminology is a synonym for "class"—agitation must precede nationalist agitation.

Unfortunately, in the case of peasants, even the old debate about how a class gets constituted as a class, or how a class-in-itself gets transformed into a class-for-itself—which was won, in my view, by those who argue that in the making of a class the ideological and cultural factors were as significant as the structural or economic ones,[46] has not led to a sufficient focus on the issue of transformation of consciousness,[47] though it has contributed to the whole "moral economy" argument and to the focus on peasant consciousness as such. Here I think that, apart from the reasons already

[45] *Ibid.*, p. 18.

[46] E.P. Thompson emerged as perhaps the earliest and most well-known spokesperson for this view which was shared by many others. See especially Thompson, *The Making of the English Working Class* and Thompson, "Folklore, Anthropology and Social History".

[47] I have already stated earlier that Rodney Hilton represents a major exception to this generalization, as do some others like John Markoff.

cited, the understanding that peasants are traditionally a class of "low classness"[48] and that, in the modern world, the class differentiation within the peasants prevents the emergence of a non-bifurcated class consciousness and they become class conscious only as differentiated classes—as rich peasants, middle peasants, or poor peasants, or as rural bourgeoisie, rural petty bourgeoisie, and agricultural proletariat—is important. Again, while not disagreeing with any of these formulations, which contain a great degree of historical truth, I do believe that this has led to an ignoring of what happens to peasants in what Hobsbawm has described as "transitional situations".[49] It is often not realized that transitional situations can last for quite long and in this period peasants are neither quite traditional nor have they disappeared into other classes or been sufficiently differentiated. Besides, it is during these transitional situations that in colonial countries the most critical movements for national liberation take place—movements that are as important in the trajectory of the formation of modern nation-states in the colonial and post-colonial world as the revolutions and movements that overthrew absolutism and feudalism were in the trajectory of the modern European nation states.[50]

It is possible, I believe, to argue with some justification that theories of peasant behaviour that are probably applicable to both classical traditional situations, or the typical modern situations in Europe or even to many post-colonial situations today are not that useful, to put it mildly, for analyzing and comprehending and acting in transitional situations. They have often been imposed with fairly disastrous results on situations unsuited to their application, either at the political or academic plane. In

[48] Teodor Shanin first made this formulation of the peasantry "as a social entity of comparatively low 'classness'". See his "Peasantry as a Political Factor", *Sociological Review*, 14, No. 1, 1966, reprinted in Teodor Shanin, ed., *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, Harmondsworth, 1971, especially pp. 253–55. Shanin, however, does not take this to mean that the peasantry cannot emerge as a class-for-itself—on the contrary—and therefore Hobsbawm's use of Shanin's formulation on "low classness" to argue his case that this peasantry cannot emerge as a class-for-itself is questionable. But more or this later. See Hobsbawm, "Peasants and Politics", pp. 5–7, for a discussion of whether the peasantry can be treated as a class.
[49] *Ibid.*, p. 18.
[50] That the specific character of particular "revolutions" influences in decisive ways the post-revolutionary regimes and societies has been stated most forcefully in recent years by Theda Skocpol in *States and Social Revolutions*. But the specificities of non-"revolutionary" transformations, that is, where the act of revolution cannot be narrowed down to one major, especially violent, moment of insurrection, as in the case of anti-feudal and anti-absolutist transformation in England or the anti-imperialist and democratic transformation in India—are as important for their post-transformation history as are the specificities of revolutionary transformations for the societies in which they occur. E.P. Thompson was perhaps the first to make this argument persuasively and sharply in his debate with Perry Anderson and Tom Nairn. See Thompson "The Peculiarities of the English", in *The Socialist Register*, 1965, reprinted in Thompson, *The Poverty of Theory and Other Essays*, London, 1978.

transitional situations at least, peasants did undergo many of the processes supposedly reserved for other classes—the processes of ideological transformation and of transformation of consciousness which even led in some cases and could have, logically speaking, led in other cases, given the right inputs, to the theoretically uncomfortable phenomenon of the peasantry becoming a class-for-itself, even though for relatively short periods of time, and with all the qualifications necessitated by the notions of low classness and internal differentiation. One can at least postulate, at the heuristic plane, that if workers, who include in their ranks the sections defined as the labour aristocracy and those who are employed as seasonal or part-time casual labour, can at least in theory constitute a class and can also be "allowed" by the same theory to become a class-for-itself, then what theoretical premises preclude the peasants, in the same modern world, from emerging, for however brief a time, as a class conscious entity, as a class-for-itself? The question should be historical, "did it happen or not", and the answers should also be historically specific and not prescriptive, or in the form of absolutes such as, "it cannot happen", or "it must happen".

I will conclude this part of my argument with a quote from Teodor Shanin, which expresses succintly the sense of what has been urged here:[51]

> In history, the peasantry many times has acted politically as a class-like social entity. Moreover, the peasantry in industrial societies has shown an ability for cohesive political action—and not only when facing traditional land-owners in belated battles of a pre-capitalist type; their common interests have driven peasants into political conflicts also with large capitalist land-owners, with various groups of townsmen and with the modern State.... The widely-accepted picture of the countryside as being rapidly sundered by an inevitable economic polarization proved oversimplified.... Furthermore the significance of specific culture, consciousness and 'the meaning attached' ... to the class position proved to be the most important. All this made peasant cohesiveness as a potential basis for political class formation much stronger than the predictions of the Russian Marxists or of the American strategists would have led us to believe.
>
> On the other hand, inescapable fragmentation of a peasantry into small local segments and the diversity and vagueness of their political aims considerably undermine their potential political impact. Hence, *how far a peasantry may be regarded as a class is not a clear-cut problem, but should be seen rather as a question of degree and historical period* (emphasis added).

[51] Shanin, *Peasants and Peasant Societies*, p. 253.

Transformed Peasants: Practice versus Theory

I shall now attempt to show why and how, on the basis of the experience of Indian peasants in the epoch of national liberation from colonial rule,[52] the formulations and assumptions outlined above need to be re-examined. I have already stated that my objection is not to their possible validity in certain historical situations—in fact, I have argued that at least one reason why they arise is that only a certain type of historical situation has formed the "data base" of these theoretical formulations. Although I do feel that even the historical cases examined in these studies can provide enough reason or evidence for questioning some of the formulations that I have identified above as problematic, at this point I propose to make my argument only on the basis of the Indian case. And this for three reasons. One, my obviously greater familiarity with the Indian experience and my considerable ignorance of the other cases. Second, and perhaps more important, the Indian case, because of its many special features, provides much clearer, much more unambiguous evidence for the argument I am about to make. Third, the Indian peasants' experience has been generally ignored in the theoretical literature that generalizes on the basis of peasant behaviour in different parts of the world, and this has meant—for the very simple reason that Indian peasants constituted a very large proportion of peasants in the world—that these theories remain at best partial and, in fact, much the poorer for having ignored this experience.

The major exception is of course Barrington Moore who included India in his comparative analysis of England, France, America, Japan, China and India. Unfortunately, however, Moore, despite his many valuable insights and despite his refusal to accept Marxist orthodoxy on many other issues, swallowed virtually wholesale the Indian Marxist understanding, and that too in its R.P. Dutt version, of the Indian national movement as a non-revolutionary movement that worked in the interests of the bourgeoisie and of Gandhi as a leader who awakened the peasants only to keep their revolutionary tendencies in check with the aid of his philosophy of non-violence, a philosophy that was basically in the interests of the propered sections. Further, because, in his own perspective, violence and revolution are synonyms, he is totally unable to see the revolutionary implications of the non-violent movements of the peasantry. For him, peasants resist only

[52] The 'facts' on which my argument in this remaining part of the chapter will be based have already appeared in the text in earlier chapters in one form or another. I shall therefore not repeat the references and will provide references only when absolutely necessary.

when they are violent and therefore he sees either the violent nineteenth-century revolts or the Communist-led Telengana struggle as "real" peasant struggles. Peasant participation in the major national struggles, or the All-India Kisan Sabha and the Kisan Sabha movements do not as much as find a mention in his account, which otherwise focuses heavily on the agrarian problem.[53]

Hamza Alavi, the other scholar who includes India in his comparative analytical framework, also unfortunately excludes from consideration the mainstream of non-violent peasant protest and focuses only on two Communist-led peasant struggles—Tebhaga in Bengal in 1946–47 and Telengana in 1946–48.[54] Consequently, the subject of our concern—the widespread non-violent peasant political activity in the twentieth century—has remained outside the scope of comparative historical or sociological analysis.

It is my contention, however, that this mainstream history of the Indian peasantry in the first half of the twentieth-century, and especially after 1918, places big question marks on many of the theoretical premises about peasantries outlined earlier. The first assumption on which a question mark is placed is that peasant consciousness is untransformable, and that therefore peasants have played and can play critical "revolutionary" roles not because they partake, along with other segments of their society, of the goals and ideologies of the modern movements for social transformation but because their revolts or movements occur in conjunction with other movements or societal crises. It is my contention that this formulation is untenable because, as demonstrated at length in Chapters 8 and 9 above, the Indian peasantry did, beyond reasonable doubt, acquire a modern anti-imperialist nationalist consciousness as well as a modern democratic consciousness. This was a consequence of the counter-hegemonic struggle of the Indian people led by the Indian National Congress which, through a massive ideological intervention, and via its major mass struggles, its electoral battles and its exercise of partial state power, successfully weaned away large sections of the Indian people, including the peasants, from the hold of anti-nationalist and anti-democratic colonial ideologies as well as from the older, traditional, monarchist or absolutist ideologies. In doing so, what it achieved was a transformation of the consciousness—no less—of the peasants, from traditional to modern, from monarchist to democratic, from colonial and traditional to anti-imperialist and nationalist.

While it is undoubtedly true that the process of class differentiation within the Indian peasantry had made considerable advances by the twentieth-century, yet "peasants" as a recognizable category still existed, and the transformation was of the consciousness of "peasants" as "peasants".

[53] See Moore, *Social Origins of Dictatorship and Democracy*, Chapter 6, especially, pp. 370–84.
[54] See Alavi, "Peasants and Revolution".

As I have argued at length above in Chapters 8, 9 and 10, it is not true that only a certain section of peasants—either a category of rich peasants who had become the rural bourgeoisie and were therefore attracted towards the "bourgeois" ideology of nationalism or a category of middle peasants who were primarily subsistence-oriented cultivators and were defending their traditional rights or a category of dispossessed or landless peasants who had emerged as the rural proletariat—constituted the social base of modern politics in this phase. Many different sections of peasants, depending on the particular circumstances, were involved in the anti-colonial struggle in various ways.

As stated earlier, one reason why the argument is being made on the basis of the Indian case is that it presents the most unambiguous example of the transformation of peasant consciousness. Though I think that it is an argument that can also be made on the basis of the Chinese, Vietnamese, Algerian and many other examples where peasant consciousness had possibly been transformed along anti-imperialist or nationalist lines, yet the room for ambiguity and counter-argument is much greater in these cases than in the Indian case. The very special feature of the Indian national movement, that it was based on a strategy of hegemonic struggle with non-violence as a basic constituent, and that it won its battle without any Red Army or liberated zones or armed guerrilla struggles, ensures that once the fact of widespread peasant support and participation is established, as I think it has been beyond any reasonable doubt, then it has also to be accepted that the peasants' consciousness was transformed, that they had internalized—of course in their own idiom, in their own specific ways, and not necessarily in the intellectualized way the middle class or the intelligentsia would internalize—the basic ideologies of anti-imperialism and democracy on which the Indian national movement was founded.

This has to be accepted because there is no other reason that can be advanced for peasant support and participation—it cannot be said that they supported out of fear, because the national movement had no mechanism, no Red Army, no guerrillas, through which it could instill fear; it cannot be said that they did this out of xenophobia, for the movement consciously eschewed any simple anti-foreign or racist sentiments and based itself, quite uniquely, on an economic critique of colonialism and a political critique of colonial authoritarianism and the undemocratic and unrepresentative character of the colonial state; it cannot even be said that they did so out of a desire to settle scores at the level of the village or the locality with their immediate exploiters because, at least initially, anti-feudal peasant class interests were not integrated into the national programme of demands, though their anti-colonial interests were.

If proof is still needed, in this day and age, that Indian peasants were capable of and willing to struggle unambiguously for national freedom,

then the example of the Quit India Movement can be repeated once again. In this movement, which had "Quit India" as its only slogan, vast masses of the peasants in many parts of the country protested vehemently and even violently (because the World War II emergency measures curbed any peaceful political expression) against the arbitrary arrests of the entire national leadership led by Gandhiji, and, what is most striking, refrained, on their own, from attacks on landlords or moneylenders even though it was only their writ that ran, sometimes for days and at other times for weeks. The targets of their wrath remained the symbols of colonial authority—police stations, railway stations, government offices and courts.

Nor do I think that some of the favourite old arguments about Gandhiji's charismatic personality or his religious appeal hold much water. Charismatic appeal is a characteristic, if it all, of all mass leaders be it Mao Zedong, Hitler, Lenin, Ho Chi Minh or Castro and it leaves us neither here nor there. And as for religious appeal, Indian peasants demonstrated that they were as willing to accept leaders who held religious beliefs, such as Gandhiji, as they were willing to accept other leaders who openly held none, such as Nehru or the Congress Socialists and the Communists. Bihari peasants, for example, did not abandon Swami Sahajanand when he became a near Communist nor did the peasants of Kerala disavow E.M.S. Namboodiripad (who belonged to one of the highest Brahmin families of Kerala), when he became a Communist. Gandhiji's imagery of Ram rajya, as argued earlier, was not a religious one, but represented an attempt to translate the concept of utopia into an Indian idiom comprehensible to the masses and was understood as such.

Lest doubts still persist that peasants were unaware of the ideological inflexions of Indian nationalism and responded only to other pressures or attractions, I cite here at some length extracts from the report of the delegation sent to tour India by the India League, a Britain-based organization whose chairman was Bertrand Russel. This delegation visited India in 1932, at the time of the second wave of the Civil Disobedience Movement. The first charge it countered in its report was that it was the personalities of leaders that counted and not "abstract political ideas", since obviously this was a favourite charge made by the colonial rulers. To quote:[55]

> The Simon Commission expressed the view that "while abstract political ideas may leave him (the villager) unaffected, the personality of a leader, such as Mr. Gandhi, will make a great appeal." The Commission also says that "the politically minded in India are only a tiny minority, but they may be able to sway masses of men in the countryside".

[55] *Conditions in India*, Report of India League Delegation, 1932, (Chairman Bertrand Russel), reproduced in Desai, *Peasant Struggles in Inda*, pp. 305–9.

The assertions are true in a measure. The masses are behind the politically-minded, but we did not find them apathetic to the great issues before the country. They were illiterate but by no means unintelligent, or unreceptive to ideas. The awakening in the villages is no doubt to a great extent due to personalities like Gandhi, Abdul Ghaffar Khan, Vallabhai Patel, Purshottamdas Tandon, Jawaharlal Nehru, Kellapan, and others. But these men have made their appeal on the basis of ideas and facts. Not all of them have an all-India or international reputation, nor are all of them reputed for the saintliness that Mr. Gandhi has.

We tested for ourselves in a number of places the extent to which the villager has appreciated the issues, and understood the causes, in the pursuit of which his property and person is being subjected to losses and risks.... We found that the economic and social issues were very live ones. We heard about poverty, taxation, foreign exploitation, neglect of education and all the other factors that are at the back of India's resistance. We found out that the villagers knew what the Congress stood for, and also that they had no illusion about the enormity of the task before the country. They knew it would mean suffering, perhaps for a long time.

We went on to talk about *swaraj* [independence] and why they wanted it. We suggested in great detail that their conditions would be better if they had more schools, roads and other facilities, if their taxes were lightened, and that to win *Swaraj* was merely a political business. We expected this to go down and to be told that the material improvements we suggested were all that they really wanted. Instead, an old man who was a working agriculturist himself, told us that *Swaraj* was a matter of self-respect, freedom, and self-power. Also he felt quite sure that without "self-power" the conditions which we had mentioned would not be obtained.... We were pointedly asked, in a village near Allahabad, why rents of landlords should be collected by a policeman, and whether a body of people who did not fight obtained anything for themselves.... In Allahabad the peasantry... knew how, ultimately, the economic plight was connected with politics.... An aged partly blind lady, who lives with her daughter in a thatched hut, formerly a neighbour's cowshed, discussed *Swaraj* with us. Her lands have been confiscated [by the Government]; she, however, refused to run away from the village. She said: "I am happy that the land is gone. We are still for the Congress. Mahatmaji has ordered us not to pay taxes. I cannot be on both sides (Government and Congress). Congress is for making us independent. We do not want to live under this Government...."

We discussed Civil Disobedience and the non-payment of taxes with a no-taxer, Isuharabhai Mundas, aged 60, of Sunav (Kaira District [Gujarat]).... We followed up the remarks with a number of questions,

> which he answered. We reproduce them here, as they tend to show the extent to which the villagers appreciate the issues involved. Isuharabhai Mundas was not a specially selected witness, but one from a crowd. He was not a specially sophisticated individual, but an average Gujarati farmer....
>
> Question: But will you have a bad *Swaraj* Government or a good British rule?
>
> Answer: If there is *Swaraj,* in any case all our money will remain here with our brothers, if not with us. But now they take everything to *Vilayat* (England)....
>
> In Ras [a village in the Kaira District of Gujarat], where all the cultivable land has been taken from the villagers, as they are no-taxers, and part of it confiscated, and the "Congress House" seized, the women told us "every house is a Congress house". They also asserted with emphasis that they would not give in till the freedom of India was won....
>
> The moral support given by villagers to the Congress, and to the national movement generally, is a marked feature of the political situation in India. *Much of the rural awakening has begun to find orientation and leadership in the village itself, while the methods of Congress organization, and the attitude of the volunteers, makes the village a significant item and not merely useful ballast*. The village is also conscious of the issues involved, and it understands the main features and consequences of the activities and the risks involved. Loyalty to the Congress is spontaneous, and the official story of paid volunteers and Congress intimidation is unfounded (emphasis added).

To reiterate, the Indian national movement had consciously left itself no weapon but that of moral or ideological persuasion or transformation, it could and did struggle only for the minds of men and women, and only when it won the struggle inside people's heads—whether these heads were traditional or had become modern or were in the transitional stage from traditional to modern can continue to be debated—could it succeed in drawing them into overt political action or overt or covert political support.

It is not my contention, however, that the consciousness of all Indian peasants was transformed in all the aspects that were in need of transformation. Far from it. I have only said that in some aspects a transformation had occurred among sufficiently large and representative sections of peasants to enable the success of the national movement in achieving two of its primary goals—independence from colonial rule and a democratic political structure (which has now survived for over 50 years) in post-colonial India. But even the Indian national movement failed to check the process

of transformation of the consciousness of the Indian people—including many sections of peasants—along communal lines. While the communalists succeeded in their objective of transforming consciousness of some sections of the people in a communal direction, the secular nationalists of all hues, including the left and the non-left nationalists, failed to either sufficiently check this process when it was occurring or re-transform popular consciousness in a secular direction to a sufficient extent once it had been communalized. The end result was the partition of India.

Similarly, casteist ideologies, both in their traditional and modern form, were not transformed to the desirable extent. In many other aspects as well, such as on the question of the rights of women or the ideology of patriarchy, peasant consciousness was obviously still in much greater need of transformation.

The process of transformation of peasant consciousness was also quite incomplete and differential when it came to the question of anti-*zamindari* or anti-landlordism. While in some parts of the country, what could, as a short-hand, be called anti-feudal ideology (though feudal is not perhaps the right word with which to describe the *zamindars* or *taluqdars* or *jagirdars*) had most likely entered the consciousness of at least some sections of peasants in the last decade or so of colonial rule, in others it was still very weak or even non-existent. It does appear, though this needs considerable further investigation, that at least in many pockets in the UP and Bihar, and possibly also Malabar in Kerala and some landlord pockets in coastal Andhra—where considerable mobilization had occurred through the Kisan Sabhas from 1937–38 onwards on the question of abolition of *zamindari*, where the Congress ministries had, as early as 1938–39, either set up formal *Zamindari* Enquiry Committees to lead up to anti-*zamindari* legislation or had even formulated legislation, though it could not be passed at that stage because of the sudden resignation of the ministries on the outbreak of the Second World War—anti-*zamindari* or anti-feudal consciousness was present among the peasantry. This became more apparent in 1946–47 (as well as in the years immediately following Independence) when the immediacy of the prospect of independence which was widely expected to lead to major changes in the agrarian class and tenurial structure, and the resumption of the process of *zamindari* abolition by the newly-elected Congress ministries, some of which, like Bihar, even introduced a formal bill on these lines in 1947, when there was a big spurt in peasant agitation on the issue of *zamindari* abolition and in some states, like Bihar, even a refusal to pay rent and physical resistance to the landlords' efforts at coercion.

But simultaneously, there were other areas, such as Bengal and British Punjab, for example, where, as demonstrated in Chapter 11, at least some sections of the tenants were still demanding, as late as in 1946–47, only a reduction in rent and not even security of tenure. And there were other

areas, like western Punjab, where tenants remained almost completely under the sway of the landlords.

Non-transformation, or incomplete or partial transformation, or transformation in a negative direction—as in the case of communalism and the modern form of casteism—as much as transformation in a positive direction, was, then, a function of the actual historical processes, including the understanding and actions of the leadership and political activists.

The second assumption of the historiography discussed earlier, about the sequence in which social and national agitation is likely to occur, also stands questioned by the experience of Indian peasants. The Indian national movement did not *first* organize local-level peasant struggles around immediate class or economic demands and then join them into a coalition of sorts from the top. On the contrary, its mass struggles, especially the initial ones such as the Swadeshi Movement in Bengal in 1905–08 and then the first nationwide mass struggle in 1920–22, the Non-Cooperation Movement, led by Gandhiji, began with straightforward national-political issues of anti-imperialism and was directed against national "wrongs" such as the partition of Bengal, the Punjab "wrong" by way of the Jallianwala Bagh massacre and its fall-out and the Khilafat "wrong". Even in later national-level mass struggles, it was political issues such as denial of representative government (as in the case of the anti-Simon Commission agitation in 1928 and in the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–32) and the British refusal to seek Indian consent on the issue of India's participation in the Second World War (as in the case of the Individual Civil Disobedience Movement of 1940–41 and the Quit India Movement of 1942) that remained at the fore. The sequence was clearly the opposite of Hobsbawm's anticipation—it was "straightforward nationalist agitation" that created the space for "social agitation". I have already demonstrated at length in Chapter 8 that peasant movements on economic or class issues emerged after the initial political space by way of transforming the consciousness of the peasants, by removing their fear of authority and by throwing up the political workers or cadre necessary for the task of mobilization and organization of peasants had been opened up by straightforward nationalist agitation and how this was readily accepted and understood even by left-wing peasant activists who had their ears close to the ground. Peasant movements or uprisings on "social" or class or parochial issues emerged either shortly after the first impetus had been given by the national-political struggle and merged into the nationwide political struggles—as in the case of the Mappila peasants of Malabar and the tenants of Avadh or the peasants of Midnapore or Guntur in 1921–22, and in the case of the peasants of Punjab, coastal Andhra, Bihar, the UP, Gujarat, Maharashtra, NWFP, Bengal and other parts of the country in 1930–31—or they emerged a few years after the major national struggles had taken place. For example, peasant movements

followed the Non-Cooperation Movement of 1920–22 in Bardoli in 1928, Punjab in 1924–25 and 1928, coastal Andhra in 1928–29; they followed the Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–32 in most parts of the country in the years 1935–36 to 1939; and they followed the Quit India Movement of 1942 and the pro-INA movement of 1945 in Punjab, Bihar, Bengal, Telengana, Kerala, Patiala and other parts of the country in 1946–47.

Indian peasants, in fact, demonstrated the capacity to engage in political action on a countrywide scale, along with other sections of society, around straightforward national-political issues even on occasions when no peasant demands were including in the programme—as in 1919, 1920–22, 1942 and 1945. Only in 1930, in the first phase of the Civil Disobedience Movement, were peasant demands directly incorporated into the list of demands presented to the colonial government. These were for the abolition of the salt monopoly and the salt tax and for reductions in land revenue and rent. However, I should not be understood as arguing that the national movement did not take up the economic demands of the peasants. It did so on many occasions and in various forms, via direct struggles, by incorporating them in its long-term programme and by passing legislation when the Congress was in power at the provincial level in 1937–39 and 1946–47. The point being argued is that peasants were not concerned only with issues immediately relevant to them in a narrow sense; they showed a considerable willingness to agitate and struggle for and support national-political demands of various kinds, which could not be reduced in any way to any conception of a narrow or even wide class interest and they even demonstrated an ability to temporarily submerge their own narrow interests in the interest of the nation as a whole. They could not have done so if they had not acquired some notion of "national" interest and some understanding of the meaning of anti-imperialist nationalism in their own consciousness, and if they were only capable of joining in nationalist struggles after or because they had been first mobilized around their class demands.

And now for the third historiographical assumption—that the peasantry, for various reasons, is not capable of emerging in the modern world as a class-for-itself in the way that workers or the bourgeoisie are capable of becoming a class, with a strong sense of class belonging and a clear sense of their own class interests. I have already argued earlier that in transitional situations, when the process or differentiation is still not fully developed, it may be possible, with all the qualifications necessitated by the notion of low classness, etc., for the unthinkable to actually happen—peasants may actually emerge as a class. Here I propose to demonstrate that the Indian peasantry did begin to emerge as a class-for-itself at the all-India level in the 1920s and certainly by the 1930s and that the process of its emergence as a class-for-itself was probably no weaker than that of the Indian working class, and that, if we can talk in the 1920s and 1930s and 1940s of an

Indian working class, then we can perhaps talk with no less justification of an Indian peasantry.

Before I get on with the task of substantiation, let me first point out that the reason the peasantry is considered unlikely to emerge as a class-for-itself is that it is incapable, *on its own,* of transcending the many barriers—of location, of ideology, of organization—that give it its particular character of low classness. But if these barriers are overcome, if there are "outside" forces that provide the necessary ideology, organization and countrywide linkages to a peasantry that is still a peasantry in the modern world, then what logical or theoretical reasons remain for assuming that it cannot emerge as a class-for-itself?[56] Further, if because of the existence of colonialism as a common enemy, the other hurdle of different sections of peasants not having common class or economic interests also disappears, then what is the theoretical barrier that still remains? If, as Amilcar Cabral has said, the national struggle is itself the form that class struggle takes in a colony, then can the peasants not unite at least in a national-class struggle against colonialism provided the other conditions of ideology, organization, etc., are met?

It is my contention that this is exactly what happened in the Indian case. The process of the formation of the Indian peasantry into a national class was set off in 1920 with the Non-Cooperation Movement that for the first time involved large sections of Indian peasants from widely disparate regional, caste, religious and social backgrounds into a common struggle which had a unified leadership, a clear-cut ideology and an organizational structure that reached up from the village to the headquarters of the movement. The next stage in this process was marked by the famous struggle of the peasants of Bardoli in Gujarat in 1928 which was led under Gandhiji's guidance and with his full approval by his close associate Vallabhbhai Patel. This struggle, as is clear from the accounts of Patels' contemporaries and other historical evidence, was the first purely peasant movement that had a nationwide impact on peasants and on other sections. Peasants in places as far away as coastal Andhra and Punjab, for example, knew of the Bardoli peasants' struggle and its non-violent techniques of political action which had met with such resounding success and these were consciously emulated in many other parts. The Civil Disobedience Movement of 1930–31 furthered the process very greatly as many more sections of peasants in many more areas were incorporated into the national mainstream, and peasant demands were also directly incorporated into the agenda of the movement. The Karachi session of the Indian National Congress in April

[56] Even in the case of the working class, is it not the intellectuals or the intelligentsia that have performed these critical tasks? Even for the capitalists, it is the intellectuals with a bourgeois ideology, and not necessarily capitalists themselves, who perform these tasks.

1931, held during the interregnum between the two phases of the Civil Disobedience Movement, formally incorporated peasant demands for reduction of land revenue and rent and scaling down of debts into the programme of the Indian National Congress. The next step came in 1936 with the incorporation of all the major peasant demands in the form of an agrarian programme for the Congress at its Faizpur session and the subsequent inclusion of these in the election manifesto of the Congress in the same year.

The process reached another qualitatively new stage with the formation of the All-India Kisan Sabha (Peasant's Association) in 1936.[57] This was the peasant counterpart of the All-India Trade Union Congress in which peasant activists from all over the country were represented in a formal organizational structure. Provincial level peasant or *kisan* organizations, which were leading a wide variety of anti-government and anti-landlord struggles based on wide sections of the peasantry, soon became a part of this all-India body, which held regular annual sessions, organized formal elections with delegates, formulated a programme of demands, etc., just as any trade union would.

At the level of political action also, there was a considerable unity. National-level peasant leaders constantly toured the entire country, addressed conferences and held consultations with provincial and local level leaders. Peasants observed All-India Kisan Days in villages across the country with meetings and rallies. They accepted men and women who were not of their locality, or their caste, or of their religion as their leaders. Within regions, peasants of one area or district demonstrated their solidarity with other areas by joining in political solidarity actions as well as by actually offering civil disobedience and serving jail terms, as I have shown at length for Punjab in Chapters 5 and 6, but which was also true for many other regions. Peasant marches that traversed a few hundred kilometres within a province brought peasants from one area in direct contact with the lives and problems of peasants from other areas, thus enabling them to break the barriers of localism and insularity. This form was particularly popular in Kerala and coastal Andhra. Peasants from remote villages visited big district towns and even the provincial capital to demonstrate in favour of their demands before the legislatures (this happened for example in Punjab, in Bihar and in coastal Andhra in the years 1938–39).

In 1942 and during 1943–45, peasants in many different parts of the country, some violently and some non-violently, participated in many different ways in all the phases of the Quit India Movement and in its sequel in the

[57] Importantly, the first two sessions of the All-India Kisan Sabha were held at Lucknow and Faizpur in 1936 along with and at the same venue as the sessions of the Indian National Congress. For details, see M.A. Rasul, *A History of the All India Kisan Sabha, Calcutta,* 1974.

form of the parallel governments that emerged in parts of Maharashtra and Bengal. In 1946–47, there was a countrywide wave of peasant protest which took a variety of forms but whose one unifying thread was that anti-landlord or anti-*zamindar* struggles dominated the scene—in Bengal, in Bihar, in Punjab, in the UP, and in the princely states all over the country. These struggles had received an impetus from the formal acceptance by the Indian National Congress in 1945 of a major peasant demand—the abolition of *zamindari* rights in land, as well as from the fact that some of the Congress ministries that came to power in the provinces in 1946, a year before Independence, had actually introduced legislation for the abolition of *zamindari*. (Other provinces in India were to follow suit soon after Independence.)

In other words, the Indian peasantry demonstrated in many ways that it was as much or as little a class during the mass phase of the struggle for Independence as the Indian working class—perhaps even more so, though I am not entering that debate here. With the help of the national movement as a whole and with the help of the left-wing, it emerged quite strongly as a class-for-itself and succeeded even in the incorporation of many of its class demands into the national agenda that was to form the basis for post-Independence restructuring.

If, as has been argued here, in the Indian case, peasant consciousness was transformed in some aspects, if national agitation preceded social agitation and if the process of the making of the Indian peasantry did register a considerable advance, then many of the assumptions about peasants and their inherent characteristics—traditionalism, localism, economism, etc.—need to be re-examined. If it could happen in even one case—and the Indian case cannot be dismissed as atypical because it encapsulates too much of the world's peasant population—then in other comparable cases also the lack of transformation of consciousness, or the lack of engagement with national issues, or the lack of the constitution of the peasantry as a class-for-itself, cannot be explained in terms of these theoretical assumptions about the peasantry. The explanation would have to be sought not in theoretical premises but in concrete historical processes—in the roles of leaders, of parties, of activists, of revolutionary theory, of ideologies, that is, in those areas of human volition that made possible the transformation of peasant consciousness, that made possible the precedence of national over social agitation and also made possible the formation of the peasants into a class, at least in the Indian case. It may, of course, also have to be sought in the concrete social, economic and political structures of the societies in which the peasants lived and struggled. But it would no longer be sought only or primarily in "peasant characteristics", though these would continue to be an important part of the analytical framework.

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